Dead Reckoning

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Dead Reckoning

by furiosity

Summary

In which Tachibana Makoto could do with a little less introspection and a little more faith.

Notes

Set during third year; both characters are over 18. This is going to be completely shameless WAFF with sprinkles of angst here and there; not even a little sorry tbh.

Chapter 1

Everyone thinks Nanase Haruka is beautiful when he swims.

Tachibana Makoto thinks Haru is beautiful always.

He loves Haru's face, so serious even when he's joking. He jokes a lot more often than most people realise, but because they tend to focus on Haru's face instead of his words, they assume he's just being weird. Which he is, often.

Makoto loves how fussy Haru gets about little things -- like not getting stains on his swimwear, refusing to eat apples that haven't been peeled (preferably by someone other than Haru, usually Makoto), and tying his school tie anew every morning instead of just loosening the knot enough to take it off over his head.

He loves the shape Haru's name makes in his mouth -- *Ha-ru-ka*, starts with a sigh; saying it makes the back of his neck get hot and the sides of his face tingle. That's why Makoto calls him Haru-chan as often as possible; otherwise he'd never stop blushing. He doesn't like that it annoys Haru, but he'd rather duck his head and smile apologetically for the rest of his life than explain himself even once.

He is sure Haru has no idea just how many reasons Makoto has to keep calling him that. Haru probably thinks Makoto does it carelessly, out of habit, not on purpose.

Makoto intends to let Haru think it. Some things aren't meant to be said.

And some things aren't meant to be. He knew that when Matsuoka Rin sauntered back into their lives. A tilt of the bill of a baseball cap in the shadowed murk of a condemned property, and Haru's eyes lit with the kind of fire Makoto has only dreamt about kindling. Makoto remembers watching Haru walk away, side by side with Rin, and thinking, despite the hollow pain in his stomach, *they look good*.

Makoto loves Haru, but he can't compete with Rin; not in the water, not in this. Rin's always swept Haru up in his passion for everything, not just swimming. But especially swimming. If Haru's life were a canvas, Rin would be the focal object, and Makoto just a background detail. He doesn't mind, not really. As long as he can be a part of Haru's life. He's happy to just be able to talk to Haru, even if he gets tuned out all the time. Rin is the one Haru could never ignore, and Makoto wouldn't try to interfere with that. The very last thing he wants is for Haru to feel torn between loyalty to Makoto and whatever he feels for Rin.

Since last summer, he's stopped stealing glances at Haru, finding reasons to touch him, meeting Haru's eyes whenever he could. He's stopped casually strolling into Haru's house and inviting Haru to sleep over. He can't bring himself to cheer Haru on, but he's almost sure he won't break into little pieces the day Haru and Rin finally talk to each other honestly.

He's rehearsed how he will smile, what he will say, where he will hide if -- when, really -- he can't keep it together.

"The next station is Iwatobi. Iwatobi." The announcer draws the last syllable out until it's almost a lyric.

Makoto glances out of the train window and lets his heart fill up with home. Tokyo was noisy and fast and wreathed in a multitude of colours so fanciful, Makoto doesn't even know their names. Here everything is endless and green on one side, endless and blue on the other, and peaceful wherever you go.

He is coming back after six weeks of an intense veterinary science practicum: six weeks of nineteen-hour days filled with data sets needing to be processed and laboratory equipment waiting to be cleaned. He's seen the animals at the research clinic maybe twice. It won't mean a whit for his university application, since he still has to pass the entrance exams, but the personal connections he's made will go a long way. Or so everyone assures him.

Six weeks of having no time to cook and subsisting on store-bought food his mother would have tossed on sight. No time to work out, either -- he'll have to train hard to show his face in the swim club again. And he's missed the summer tournament, but that couldn't be helped.

Six weeks without Haru.

Until this trip, Makoto has never been away from Haru for longer than a day, two at the most. There was that one time Haru's parents took him on a week-long tour of all the nearby hot springs, but Haru got sick and the trip ended early. Makoto hoped that six weeks without seeing Haru's face would help him finally push his feelings far enough away that they don't hurt him any more, but instead he missed Haru so bad that he could barely fall asleep most nights.

So much for out of sight, out of mind.

Makoto did his best not to bother Haru too often; he sent him a text once a day, if that. Haru responded just twice. *I'm fine even if you're not here*, said one mail, in response to Makoto asking if Haru was doing well. The other one said, *So are you going to move to Tokyo after graduation?* That one came after Makoto sent Haru a photo of a lively festival procession he'd stumbled onto after getting lost on his way from the clinic to the boarding house.

Both are the sort of thing Haru would say; both cut right into Makoto even though he knows that Haru didn't mean anything bad.

He just hasn't missed me is all, Makoto thinks as the train pulls into the station. *He knows I'm coming back, so to him there's no point getting all worked up about it. I'm not Rin.* He hefts his bag and wonders if the chocolate-covered cakes he bought for Ran and Ren survived the trip.

As soon as he steps off the train, a high-pitched shriek resounds across the platform, and Makoto is nearly knocked to the ground by a tiny meteor bearing a marked resemblance to his baby sister.

"Stupid Makoto," she bawls, clinging to his leg. "Stupid, stupid!"

"Ran-chan!" his mother half-shouts, half-whispers in that way only parents can. She picks her purse up from the bench by the drink vending machine and walks towards her children.

Makoto laughs and fluffs Ran's hair. "How did you know I'd be on this train?" he asks his mother, if only to distract her from her obvious intention to scold Ran more.

"Oh, we weren't sure, but we were in town buying school supplies anyway, and your sister insisted on coming by to check just in case." She reaches up to brush Makoto's hair away from his forehead. "You look pale. Have you been eating properly?"

"Stupid," Ran mutters, but it's more of an afterthought than anything. She lets Makoto take her hand and lead her towards the platform staircase.

A young man dressed unseasonably in a dark blue hoodie hops off the bottom stair ahead of them and starts towards the central square. It's clearly Haru -- Makoto hasn't been away so long that he would forget Haru's walk.

"Haru?" he calls, but the young man continues on his way without the slightest pause.

"You've missed Haru-chan, haven't you?" his mother remarks, patting the back of Makoto's shoulder. "After we get home, why don't you go over and invite him to supper?"

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Makoto rings the Nanase doorbell, feeling at once ridiculous and terrified. This silent, large house used to be a friend, but since last summer, they've become closer to casual acquaintances. And now, after six weeks away from Iwatobi, it's as though he doesn't even belong in front of this door.

He's being silly, of course; you can't be friends with a house. The truth is he's just scared -- of things changing, of growing apart. Makoto thought they would always be together, but Haru *did* casually suggest that Makoto move to Tokyo, so who knows? Who really knows?

Makoto rings the doorbell once again, then considers walking around to the back like he used to, but he can't make himself do it after all this time. It occurs to him then -- what if that *was* Haru at the station? What if he happened to be there and then ignored Makoto on purpose? If Haru doesn't want to see him, Makoto would rather die than appear in Haru's sight. Not even to ask him why.

He rings a third time, chest constricting as he strains to hear any sound of movement inside the house. It feels as though he's jumped into a freezing pond, feet first, and his brain has just clued in to the temperature.

"I guess he's not home," Makoto mutters, not sure if he's trying to reassure himself or to appear less pathetic to any neighbours who might be watching. He bites his lip, swallows his disappointment, and walks briskly away from Haru's door.

Where could he be on Friday afternoon?

He's halfway to the alley with the stairs when he hears, "Hey."

Makoto turns his head to look at Haru staring at him from the doorway with his usual deadpan expression. In the time it takes for the rest of his body to catch up to his head, he's smiling like a fool because that's all he can do. Haru is perfect.

"Haru. Long time no see!" he says, still grinning, wishing like hell to imitate Ran's earlier mad dash across the platform. Only he's a little too tall to stick to Haru's leg. He'd settle for hugging Haru to himself for an hour or two. Might as well wish for the ocean in his pocket.

"Come to my house for supper?" Makoto offers.

"Sure," Haru says. "Just let me get changed." He heads back inside; Makoto follows. He's not sure why Haru needs to change; he looks just fine in the Iwatobi-chan tank top.

Makoto walks into the living room to switch on the TV while he waits, but stops abruptly, staring at one of the cushions next to the table. Atop it is a dark blue hoodie he saw not an hour ago. As Makoto picks it up for a closer look, a scrap of paper falls from its pocket: a convenience store receipt for a bag of chips -- it's from the store next to the train station. Today's date. Time just after Makoto's arrival.

So that was Haru after all. He sits down heavily and lets the hoodie drop back onto the cushion.

Haru walks in, tugging the hem of a light blue shirt down over the same pair of shorts. "I'm ready."

"That was you at the station," Makoto says, looking up at him. "Why didn't you say anything?" *Why did you ignore me?*

Haru shrugs. "You looked busy. I figured I'd see you later anyway."

"I called your name." Makoto doesn't know why he's trying to argue with Haru; even if he wins, he'll feel awful in the end. But it seems he's felt too much and bottled up too much, and now he's upset enough to childishly want to talk back no matter what Haru says.

"I didn't want to intrude," Haru explains. "You were with your family."

"You're like family too."

The corners of Haru's mouth twitch faintly downward. "What, like brothers?"

"I-- that's not what I-- Haru-chan, why have you been acting so weird?"

There. He's said it. It *is* weird that Haru didn't respond to his mails. It *is* weird that Haru came to the train station and then ignored Makoto after not seeing each other all summer holiday. None of it makes any sense.

Haru bends down to toss the hoodie aside, sits down next to Makoto, leans over to headbutt Makoto's shoulder, and stays there.

Makoto freezes and stares at Haru's hand braced against the tatami. Haru's forehead is cool even through Makoto's shirtsleeve, but the weight of Haru's touch sends slow warmth up and down Makoto's arm. "Haru...chan?"

"Stop calling me that," Haru mutters. "It was no good without you, you know. So," -- he cuts off and tips a little further forward, pressing harder against Makoto's arm.

"So?" Makoto prompts, heart beginning to race. He's not sure what's happening, but Haru is touching him. On purpose. Haru never does that.

"Nothing," Haru says, sitting up straight. "Never mind."

"Okay," Makoto says with a sigh. *Oh well, at least we didn't end up having an argument.* He wants to clap a hand to his shoulder to keep the imprint of Haru's touch from dissipating for just a little longer, but that would look really strange.

Haru gives him a sidelong look full of... annoyance? "You give up too easy."

Makoto blinks. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I tell you what to do and you just do it. Don't you *want* to know so what?"

"But you *said* it was nothing," Makoto protests. Even if it's not nothing, if Haru just doesn't want to say it, why would Makoto force him to?

"Forget it," Haru mutters. The sullen look on his face suggests that Makoto had better not forget it, or else.

Makoto raises both hands in surrender. "Okay, okay -- so? So... what? I want to know, so please tell me what you wanted to say."

"So don't ever leave again," Haru tells him, glaring a little. "*Ever.*"

Makoto feels like his chest is about to explode into a million rainbows. "Okay, I won't," he says. He'll have to take a train for two hours every day if he gets into the school he's chosen, but so what? Lots of people do that kind of thing. It'll give him time to actually read his textbooks. "I'll stay with you, if that's what you want."

Haru leans over again, but this time it's not forehead to shoulder but lips pressed to Makoto's mouth, gentle and soft. Haru exhales noisily; their eyes lock, and Makoto's entire face feels engulfed in flames. Thoughts become a foreign concept.

Haru pulls back with his eyes downcast, but he opens them to meet Makoto's gaze as soon as he's far enough away that Makoto can't feel his breath any more. Makoto stares at him; he's pretty sure he's about to burst into tears, but he can't really tell because his face is still on fire, his head has gone all fuzzy, and his heart is beating so loudly in his temples that it's all he can hear.

"Haruka," he whispers, barely audible.

Haru's cheeks turn a deep pink. "Will you still stay if this is what I want?"

Forever, Makoto thinks. "But what about Rin?" he blurts out instead.

Haru's eyes widen the way they always do whenever Rin's mentioned, and Makoto's heart plummets. *Please don't tell me I've just made him realise it now.* Sometimes he forgets how oblivious Haru can be about the most self-evident things.

Haru's eyebrows draw together in confusion. "What's *Rin* got to do with anything?"

"I, um." Makoto lets out a shaky laugh. "Isn't Rin the one you like?"

"Rin only cares about himself. Who would fall for a guy like that?"

Makoto swallows to try and wet his dry throat. "Some people are attracted to aloof types."

"Rin's not aloof," Haru points out. "He's got too much pride." His frown deepens. "Is that why you became strange since last summer? Because of Rin?"

Makoto really doesn't want to have that conversation. If he was wrong about Rin, he was wrong about many other things, and he doesn't want to think about them just now. Haru's heat still clings to his mouth, and he wants it back. He pulls Haru in by one shoulder and goes to kiss him, wishing he could be as cool about it as Haru was just now. But his nose bumps against Haru's and his mouth only ends up where Makoto wants it to go by some miracle of physics; he's so flustered he could die.

Makoto squeezes his eyes shut, ashamed that he has no idea what he's doing. He's never wanted to kiss anyone except Haru, and this is the first time he's getting the chance. It's seriously like something out of a sappy TV drama. Makoto's hand on Haru's shoulder clenches. Haru's breath stutters; his lips part slightly beneath Makoto's.

Makoto's phone rings in his pocket, startling them apart. He pulls the phone out, hiding his eyes from Haru. "It's my mom," he explains and forces his breathing to steady before answering. "Hello?"

"Are you two on your way yet? Food's almost ready. Oh, what's wrong with your voice? Did you already catch a cold?"

Makoto has completely forgotten that he came here to invite Haru over. "I'm fine. Sorry for making everyone wait."

"It's your welcome-back party. You can be late if you want."

"No, we'll be right there."

[tbc]

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> In which Makoto acquires perspective from an unexpected source. Or maybe he doesn't; it's hard to tell with all the feelings.

He doesn't want to go home; he wants to stay right here and try kissing Haru again, but Haru's already getting up from the cushion. Makoto follows him to the main entrance.

As he straightens up from tying his shoes -- he was in such a hurry to see Haru that he didn't think to change into shoes without laces when he stopped off to drop his bag at home -- Makoto tries on his usual smile, but it doesn't fit. Haru's right in front of him, but his eyes are once again distant. Makoto has always wanted to see wherever it is Haru goes when he tunes out reality.

Haru's gaze comes back into focus, and he tilts his head up to meet Makoto's eyes. Makoto wishes he had not refused to let himself daydream of moments like this, because he does not know what to do. There's nothing he *can* do besides stare at Haru's beautiful face and try to shape the right words, even though his tongue won't move and his thoughts are all jumbled like yarn in a basket after kittens have been at it.

"Haru," he manages. "You-- I-- I'm sorry."

He's sorry he picked up the phone just now. He's sorry he tried to start a fight earlier. He's sorry he made assumptions about Rin last year. He's sorry he didn't just talk to Haru when he realised that his feelings went a bit to the side from friendship.

Haru just nods; he doesn't need Makoto to explain any of this. Everyone thinks Makoto is some kind of Haru-expert, always knowing what Haru's thinking, but the truth is that Makoto has spent a lot of years learning what Haru is all about, and sometimes he still doesn't get it. Haru's the one who has always understood Makoto's feelings without even trying to.

Makoto hugs Haru on impulse, and it's awkward -- his arms end up halfway down Haru's upper arms, not around his shoulders, but he's afraid to move. He's pushing it, now -- Haru doesn't really like it when people hug him; he always says it's annoying. But Haru rests his cheek on Makoto's shoulder and raises his right hand to give Makoto's hip a light pat. His hair smells like the ocean.

"We should go," Haru says.

Makoto nods, wishing he had the courage to ask him to stay. Neither of them move for a long moment, then Makoto sighs and lets go. "Sorry," he mumbles as he heads for the door.

Sorry for what, he's not sure this time.

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"Speaking of laundry, Haru-kun, did the baking soda do the trick?" Makoto's mother asks after the five of them -- Dad's still not back from work -- settle back from their emptied plates. Makoto's just finished telling them about the coin laundry he was using in Tokyo: it had three resident cats who chased away anyone they didn't like.

"Oh," Haru says. "Yes, it worked; thank you very much."

Makoto looks at Haru next to him, then at his mother. "Baking soda?"

"It's nothing," Haru says, his cheeks a bit flushed.

"Haru put some red underpants in with white sheets and made them pink," Ren announces.

"Don't tell him that," Haru complains. He turns to Makoto. "It was a shirt, anyway. Not underpants."

Makoto smiles at him. "I know; you don't even own any red underpants."

"How do you even know that?" Ren asks, slapping both hands on the table and rising a little in his chair to peer at Makoto.

"They're best friends," Ran puts in with an ostentatious eye-roll. "Of course they know all about each other's clothes."

"They're not *girl* best friends," Ren counters. "Men don't care about clothes. Right, Haru?"

"Ask me again when you have to wash your own clothes instead of having your mom do it," Haru replies.

"I'll never do it," Ren vows. "I'll just get a wife."

"With an attitude like that, I doubt anyone will want to be your wife," Haru says. "There's curry on your chin."

"Fine, then I'll marry you," Ren says to him, grabbing a napkin. "*You* can do my laundry."

Ran giggles. "Boys can't get married to each other, stupid. Don't you know anything?"

"Oh, that reminds me," Mom says with a light laugh. "You two must have been six, seven years old? Haru-kun came over with a bucket of fish and offered it to us as Mako-kun's bride price. I still have no idea where you even learned of such a strange custom at that age, Haru-kun."

"Grandma's stories," Haru explains. "I don't remember doing that, though." Makoto doesn't, either.

"What's a bride price?" Ren asks. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're out of luck," Ran says and pokes Ren in the side. "Makoto was there first."

"But Makoto can do his own laundry!" Ren protests. "If he marries Haru, it's just a waste, isn't it?"

"Listen, Ren-chan, people don't marry because of laundry," Makoto says, studiously avoiding Haru's eyes. "You marry somebody because you care about them a lot and want to grow old together."

Ran tugs on one of her twin tails. "Is that why you want to marry my brother?" she asks, addressing Haru, who immediately looks a bit like a tanuki before a wolf.

Mom laughs. "He said it was because girls were too troublesome, Ran-chan. I'm sure Haru-kun has changed his mind about that since then." She says it with such conviction that Makoto wants to fall through the floor and never come back up again, chair and all.

Ren takes this opportunity to reach for the toothpicks, but Mom bats his hand away. "You've still got the other one in your mouth."

"What, this old thing?" Ren whines. "I'm already done with it, let me have another one!"

"Don't be wasteful," Mom says. "You've barely used it at all; I've been watching you."

Ran leans over, fishes a toothpick out and waves it in front of Ren's face. "Look what *I*'ve got!"

"Ran-chan, that's mean," Makoto says. "Please don't fight." The words come out smoothly, and he even has the wherewithal to smile, but all he can see is Haru's pensive, thoughtful expression.

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"I'm done with the bathroom," Haru says, walking into Makoto's room.

"Ah, thank you." Makoto pulls his pyjama top over his head and grabs his towel from the back of his desk chair.

They were up so late playing Uno with the kids that Mom insisted Haru stay overnight. What horrors she thinks are going to befall a peak physically fit eighteen-year-old boy walking literally fifty-nine steps in the darkened streets outside by himself, Makoto isn't sure, but he's happy that Haru's staying. Everything is brighter when Haru's around, even if they sit in opposite ends of the room without speaking.

After he finishes in the bathroom, he finds Haru sitting cross-legged atop the futon he's laid out, flipping through *Swimming Monthly*. "Do you think your mom would be upset if she'd seen us, you know. Earlier?" he asks without looking up.

"I don't know," Makoto says, flushing. He's spent most of the evening trying not to think about what happened earlier, and kept forgetting to say *Uno*. "My mom's a kind person, but I don't know what she thinks about that kind of thing."

"What if she's completely against it?"

Makoto frowns. "Please don't ask me such scary things, Haru-chan."

Haru nods, his face as serene as always, and climbs inside the futon. "Good night."

"Good night," Makoto says, flicking the bedside lamp off. A streetlight from outside peeks in through the half-shut blinds, casting rows of light over Haru's futon.

Makoto pulls his blanket to his chin and stares at the ceiling. He can barely believe that he and Haru had actually kissed, even if it wasn't a proper grown-up kind of kiss. Trying to contemplate telling other people, especially his parents, that he'd like to kiss Haru as often as he possibly can, is a bit beyond him just now.

If this were some TV drama, he could tell Haru something pretty, like *nothing will ever keep us apart again* or something along those lines. But Makoto is not the sort of person who can care about one person to the exclusion of everyone else. He wouldn't be able to live happily without Haru in his life, or without his family. Thinking about maybe having to choose between the two makes him so unhappy he feels like the underwater *thing* he feared in childhood is after him again. So he's not going to do even think about it -- not without a real reason to. For all he knows, his parents would be happy for the two of them. Not that he has any plans to tell them anything just yet.

He falls asleep thinking about the way Haru's lips felt against his while listening to Haru's even, steady breathing in the gloom.

He wakes while it's still dark outside -- dark and quiet, the sort of quiet that only happens in Iwatobi in the deadest hours of the night. The blue-and-white digital clock on top of his bookcase reads 3AM. Makoto yawns, meaning to settle back into the warmth of his blankets. As his chest expands, it pushes against something hard, and the yawn is cut short. The feeling is so frustrating that Makoto's suddenly wide awake. He lifts the blanket and finds Haru curled up next to him. The hard thing Makoto bumped was Haru's back.

"Why didn't you just tell me you wanted to sleep here, Haru-chan?" Makoto murmurs, even though he is sure Haru can't hear him. Haru's dad always jokes that his son is good at two things: swimming and sleeping, and he approaches both with equal seriousness.

Olympic-level sleeping or not, Makoto tries to be very quiet as he gets out of bed and feels his way towards Haru's abandoned futon, burrowing into it completely. It's warm, whether because Haru only recently left it or because traces of Haru's body heat still cling to Makoto. His face and neck flush hot all over, and he thinks about going back to his bed and putting his arms around Haru and syncing his breath to Haru's and pressing small kisses to the nape of Haru's neck, light and careful so as not to wake him.

He's never allowed his imagination go this far, and soon he's so keyed up that he has to steal out to the bathroom to splash cold water into his face. But the pipes are very old and noisy, so he can only have the water dribble from the faucet. He fills cupped palms with lukewarm water and rubs them against his face, letting the drops slide down his chest. They evaporate before reaching the part of him that really needs to cool down.

He tries to think about Haru and Rin, walking away from him hand in hand, looking perfect together. Before today, the very thought sent icy dread crawling up his spine, but now all he can hear is Haru's soft voice saying *Who would fall for a guy like that?* and the chill never comes. Haru could have been kissing Rin, who's gorgeous and cool and interesting, but he chose to kiss Makoto instead.

Makoto gives his mirror reflection a disappointed look. *Stop thinking about the kissing.* But when he stops thinking about that, his whole world fills with Haru in his bed, nestled against Makoto as if they sleep together every day. Haru opening one eye and drawing Makoto in for a sleepy kiss that turns into several that turns into Makoto reaching for Haru's--

Stop it! Makoto's starting to panic; his stupid lower body just won't quit, and he's sure that any minute now someone will need to use the bathroom. He knows the quickest method for getting rid of this sort of discomfort, but he can't do it where someone might walk in on him, and he's definitely not going to do it in the same room as a sleeping Haru; that would feel like a violation, somehow.

Makoto doesn't even know if Haru's interested in this kind of thing in the first place. It's difficult to imagine calm-as-stillwater Haru getting stirred up like this, flushed and hard and nearly weeping with frustration. At best, he can imagine Haru letting Makoto do what he wants because he doesn't want Makoto to suffer.

The idea of doing something sexual to Haru when Haru doesn't want it is so repulsive that Makoto's excitement levels drop as fast as they rose. Thoroughly ashamed, he slinks back to his room and makes it halfway to his bed when he remembers about the futon.

The next time he wakes, it's light; the window blinds are up and Haru's on the bed, nose in *Swimming Monthly*. "Good morning," Makoto murmurs, smiling.

"Why'd you move to the futon?" Haru asks, gazing at him over the top of the magazine.

Makoto sits up and tries to fluff his sleep-matted hair. "It seemed like you wanted to sleep in the bed." *It's difficult to interpret crawling right into the bed in any other way, isn't it?*

"I wanted to sleep next to you."

Makoto's cheeks sting with heat. "I-- um, I didn't realise? I'm sorry."

Haru sighs. "Sorry for doing that kind of thing after what we talked about."

"No, you didn't do anything wrong," Makoto protests. "It's fine, really, we even used to take baths together. It isn't anything indecent." *I'm the one who's indecent.* Not that Makoto is planning on telling Haru about his nighttime bathroom adventures.

Haru's phone buzzes. "Nagisa says they're waiting for us at the pool, so get dressed and let's go."

"What, the whole club?" Makoto asks, relieved at the change in subject.

Haru shakes his head. "Just Nagisa, Rei, and Kou."

"I guess Nagisa can't wait for me to make it official," Makoto says. With university entrance exams coming up, Makoto needs to scale down his club participation, and Nagisa's in line to be captain since Haru absolutely refuses.

"I don't think that's it," Haru says. "If it's an official announcement, shouldn't the whole club hear it?"

Makoto climbs out of the futon and starts folding up the bedding. "That's true. Do you think he wants to scold me again for missing all the summer competitions?"

"Maybe they all just want to see you," Haru says with a shrug.

"Oh." Makoto rubs his nose to hide his embarrassment. He's been so preoccupied with Haru that he's almost forgotten he had other friends.

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"So what's your new strategy against Samezuka?" Makoto asks Nagisa. They've just swum a 50m practice race and Nagisa beat him by a full second. Captain or not, scaling down or not, Makoto's going to have to work harder if he wants to compete at all this year.

Haru, who floated away when Makoto was still telling the others about Tokyo, swims closer.

Makoto's heart does that little flutter he gets whenever watching Haru move through water. He doesn't need to look back at Kou and Rei at the poolside to know that their eyes are fixated on Haru just as attentively.

Nagisa gives a dejected sigh. "What are we going to do when the two of you graduate?"

Makoto doesn't know what to tell him; he can't stop staring at Haru now that he's surfaced right next to Makoto. Drops of water slide down Haru's neck, pause slightly at the delicate hollow underneath his collarbones, and trickle back into the pool. Makoto remembers standing in his bathroom last night with water dripping down *his* chest and wishes he and Haru were alone in the world, if only for a few minutes.

It's as though his mind, having been given permission, can't stop turning every vision of Haru into a prurient fantasy; what on earth is *wrong* with him? He's glad the water is cold enough to shrink things that ought to stay shrunk in public places.

Rei paddles over to join them, and then Makoto hears himself start to say, "Last night, Haru and I slept together, and--"

"What?" Kou splutters behind them. Nagisa's jaw drops, and Rei's entire face turns bright red. Haru rolls his eyes.

"That's not how I meant it!" Makoto protests, waving both hands at them, absolutely mortified. "I meant to say he slept over at my house. Slept over!" For all that his body can't betray him as long as he stays in the water, his brain is doing a *great* job betraying him just the same.

Now he's forgotten *what* he was trying to say. How is Haru sleeping over even related to the upcoming Samezuka meet? He *was* trying to make a point, but it's long gone. Makoto snaps on his goggles and submerges.

When he surfaces on the opposite end of the pool, they've stopped giggling, and their strategy-practice-catching-up session resumes until Nagisa has to leave for his part-time job at the community pool.

"You going home?" Haru asks as they're getting dressed in the brand new changing room -- now that the swimming club's brought home a couple of trophies, their facilities have been upgraded too.

"No, I've got to pick up some school stuff in town," Makoto says. "Want to come with me?" He only asks as a formality; Haru *hates* shopping for school supplies.

Sure enough, Haru shakes his head. "Come over later if you want."

Makoto nods and watches him leave. He wants to put his whole life on hold until he can figure out what's happening between the two of them -- if anything is happening at all. But there's no time: school starts back up in just one more day. Their very last term in high school.

He leaves his bike behind; he probably won't be able to find a place to park it anywhere near the shopping district this early on Saturday afternoon. It's only a ten-minute walk, anyway.

After Makoto begins his wander down the main street towards the stationery shop, he makes a beeline for the bookstore. They sometimes have liquidation sales right around this time of year; maybe he can find a cheap English dictionary and stop getting yelled at for never bringing one. Makoto has never understood the big deal about having a dictionary, since they can just look things up online using their phones. But he supposes that for his teacher's generation, the internet is just some chat room full of lies.

He sees no sale signs inside the store, just a large stand in the centre promoting a lurid pink book about something called the *Sex Diet* -- must be the newest fad. But the display reminds Makoto of that time a couple of boys from their class brought in some Shōwa-era sex manual and giggled over how innocent it all was until Ama-chan-sensei confiscated it.

If there were such things in the past, surely there must be more updated ones available now? It's not like he has anyone he can talk to about this stuff.

He does find just such a thing in the self-development section, squashed between a book on quitting smoking (in just one day!) and another on improving lateral thinking, whatever that is. It's a chunky, generic-looking tome with abstract art on the cover, promising "detailed illustrations" and "a full initiation into the art and science of sexual fulfilment".

Makoto flips through it with a frown. Judging by the table of contents, it's a glorified anatomy textbook, and he's not really interested in the how-to. He wants to know what to do about all the feelings.

"Makoto-senpai?"

It's Rei's voice, and Makoto casually slaps the book closed and slides it back into its gap; being seen with such a thing would be triple-embarrassing after what he said about sleeping with Haru earlier.

"Yo, Rei. Some strange books in this store," Makoto says with an easy smile. "Do you know where they keep the dictionaries?"

Rei's face is not as red as it was when they were in the pool and Makoto shoved his entire foot into his mouth, but it is definitely pinker than usual.

Oh, crap. He did see.

"Actually," Rei says, his voice a bit rough. "I-- uh. I saw you and Ha-- uh, I mean I couldn't help noticing how--. Ah. Erm. Please feel free to borrow this!"

He's almost shouting as he pushes a light-novel-sized paperback in a thick blue privacy cover into Makoto's chest and runs out of the store so fast it would probably earn him some kind of medal if he still ran track.

The book starts to slide to the ground; Makoto catches it reflexively and then opens it. The title page bears the author's name, a drawing of two impossibly pretty young men staring into each other's eyes, and the title:

Dare Speak its Name
An illustrated guide to male homosexual relationships

[tbc]

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> In which Makoto does not get a chance to learn what not to do with buttercream frosting.

Makoto snaps the book shut and glances over his shoulder. If anyone noticed Rei's dramatic exit, they're no longer in sight. *Phew.*

*

A few hours later, he has stacked his brand-new notebooks on top of the writing desk in his room. He should be decorating them with the colourful marine-life stickers Ren and Ran gave him at breakfast. Instead, he stands by the window, looking down at the stairs below. Stairs to the street that ends in more stairs, those that lead to Haru's house.

The little book Rei gave him is just behind him, on the bed next to his pillow. It's the weirdest feeling, but Makoto would swear the thing is *staring* at him.

Makoto turns his back to the window to give the book a cautious glance. It isn't staring at him, obviously; it's a *book*, for crying out loud. The feeling of being watched persists nonetheless.

What does "guide to male homosexual relationships" even mean, anyway? Does it contain proper hand-holding procedure, like that old-timey sex manual did? Does it talk about how to let your parents know that you're going out with a boy, not a girl? Does it have practical advice on how not to behave like some kind of a love-struck zombie?

Makoto shakes his head, strides across the room, sits down on the bed, and opens the book past the title page. He's not going to learn anything from staring at the cover.

It's more manga than textbook -- the first chapter, *Different Doesn't Have to Mean Bad*, introduces Yamagami Sora, a twenty-something office worker, who is transferred to a new department and develops an inexplicable crush on the man at the desk across from him. Then comes the harrowing tale of poor Yamagami refusing to believe that it's a crush and trying to ignore his feelings by throwing himself first into work, then into hobbies, then into serial group dating.

Makoto doesn't need to make peace with his feelings for Haru; he's never questioned them to begin with. He flips ahead to *Chapter Nine: What Not to Do with Buttercream Frosting*, which opens with a picture of the hapless protagonist tied to a chair with his shirt off and a

man kneeling between his spread legs. The man is not the handsome coworker from the first chapter.

Makoto bites his lower lip. He's never been interested in this kind of material, but it feels so different from the naughty pictures passed around in class sometimes. Those usually have full-colour naked people in uncomfortable poses, black bars across their eyes as if to hide their true feelings.

Come to think of it, Haru always refuses to look at those pictures, declaring them boring. Different medium aside, what on Earth is Makoto doing with a book like this? Didn't he decide that he needs to know what Haru wants before getting all excited?

His mail notification goes off, and Makoto snatches the phone up, grateful for the distraction. The message is from Rei.

`I'm sorry for doing something unnecessary and causing trouble; I didn't mean to embarrass you. I am always being saved by you after all, so when I saw an opportunity to be helpful, I jumped on it without thinking. You can just leave that book in my shoe locker on Monday.`

Makoto sighs and punches the call button. The line rings twice.

"H-hello?" Rei says on the other end.

"Sorry for suddenly calling," Makoto says. "I just wanted to say you don't have to apologise. You didn't cause any trouble."

Rei exhales. "I see. Are-- are you sure it's okay?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Rei?"

"Yes?"

"Was I that obvious? About, you know."

"No!" Rei protests. "It's not that you were obvious. I only noticed because... well, *because*."

Makoto doesn't push. "Okay, well, I'm relieved now."

"I'll support y-- uhm." Rei coughs. "I'll see you at school on Monday."

Makoto hangs up and lets the phone drop to the bed. Has Rei fallen for someone, too? Or did he just have a book like this because he has books for every occasion? Makoto's no math genius, but the odds are too low that Rei just happened to be carrying this particular book today.

He opens a random page near the back of the book. An unfamiliar character with bright green hair presents a very frank view of his rear end. *Is that what it really looks like back there?*

Underneath the picture are several paragraphs of text to do with proper hygiene of the part in the illustration. Makoto blushes.

His phone buzzes; Makoto half expects it to be a follow-up apology from Rei, but it's a message from Haru.

`Are you coming over or what?`

*

Haru doesn't come to the front door when Makoto rings, but this time Makoto doesn't hesitate before going around the back.

He finds Haru at the living room table. His notebooks -- from a stack bulk-purchased years ago -- lie strewn before him, and he's studying a sheet of stickers with the look of a man deciding on new wallpaper. Ran and Ren gave Haru dolphin stickers that morning.

"Hey," Makoto says, not moving from the doorway. "Sorry I took a while."

Haru nods at the cushion next to him. "The smiling one or the one in glasses?" he asks, proffering the sticker sheet as Makoto gets comfortable.

"Let's see," Makoto murmurs, looking at the two dolphins Haruka pointed out. "Which subject?"

"I don't know. Geography?"

"Then the one in the glasses. The geography teacher wears glasses, right?"

They spend a good twenty minutes putting stickers on notebooks; Makoto has better penmanship so he starts writing the subject names on the covers with a marker. It doesn't go very well. He keeps stealing looks at Haru and daydreaming. If he sets the marker down and reaches out with his right hand to turn Haru's face towards him, he can just lean in and kiss him; it would be the sort of thing that just casually happens sometimes, wouldn't it?

"Stop thinking about it and do it," Haru advises him.

Makoto puts the marker down hastily, as if it's at fault for his skyrocketing heart rate. It rolls across the table and bumps against a finished stack of notebooks. "I-- Haru-chan, is everything going to change now?"

"You don't want it to change," Haru says. He slides his finger back and forth across a sticker on an unmarked notebook, even though it's affixed quite firmly.

"That's not it. I-I have... feelings. For you. That is, I've had feelings for you for a while. I never thought you-- what I mean to say is, I don't know if you h-have them too."

Haru turns his face aside. "Do we have to talk about it like this?"

"We don't have to," Makoto says quickly. "I didn't mean to put you on the spot."

"It's obvious anyway, isn't it?" Haru mutters, still not looking at Makoto.

Makoto would not characterise anything about this situation as *obvious*. Ever since they kissed in this room yesterday, it's as though he's lost the ability to intuit what Haru's thinking.

His hand is steadier than he thought it would be as he reaches out to lay it across Haru's cheek and turn Haru's face towards himself. Maybe it's because he's rehearsed it mentally, but it's so much easier than yesterday to lean forward and touch his lips to Haru's, and then press, pull away just a little, kiss him again. Haru tilts his head slightly to rest his cheek in Makoto's palm and lets himself be kissed.

Feeling Haru -- persnickety, cagey Haru -- relax into his touch emboldens Makoto; he leans so much closer he has to brace against the floor with his free arm. Haru's soft mouth is everything he's ever wanted, but now that he's got it, he wants even more: to pin Haru to the floor, or a wall, or a bed; to feel Haru press up against him, every line and angle of him softening against Makoto's skin; to have a taste of the inside of Haru's mouth and what's beneath his clothes.

He flicks his tongue against Haru's bottom lip just enough to wet it, and Haru turns away from him, draws away so sharply Makoto can almost hear the mounting heat between them rip in two. There's fear on Haru's face, wide-eyed with near-panic. Like that time they took the kids to a water park and Ren got lost. *I can't find your brother.*

Makoto winces as he pulls away to give Haru back his space. The warmth that seemed everlasting just a moment ago evaporates to a sick dread deep in his chest. He should have known. It isn't like Haru to get swept up in emotion, and it's especially not like Haru to let himself be touched so casually. He hasn't allowed these thoughts in because just for a little bit longer, he wanted to feel like he had a chance.

Haru hates emotional displays and he hates it when people touch him. It was awfully naive of Makoto to even imagine that he might be special; why would he be? They've known each other for a decade. It makes about as much sense for Haru to suddenly fall for Makoto as it does for Makoto to suddenly fall for someone other than Haru.

And here he was earlier, trying to make Haru talk about his feelings. What was he thinking? Of course Haru doesn't return his feelings. He just doesn't want Makoto to leave him; that's all. He probably decided he has to let Makoto have his way to keep him close.

I just wanted it to be more than a dream, Haru-chan. I'm sorry. It's Makoto's turn to look away.

"You don't need to do this kind of thing for my sake," he says in a low voice. "I'll stay with you no matter what, so don't force yourself."

"You don't care if I-- if we don't?" Haru asks. Makoto is too ashamed of himself to meet his eyes.

"That's right," he lies. "I'm sorry for doing something strange to you, Haru-chan. I'll just leave for today, all right?" He starts to rise, but Haru grabs his arm and keeps him seated.

"Didn't you just say you'd be with me no matter what?"

Why is he being so mean? "It's just for now," Makoto says, smiling apologetically at his knees. "I, uh, remembered I have something to do. I'll come again tomorrow."

"If you do that with someone else, I'll get mad."

"You're the only one I--" Makoto begins, but catches himself just in time. "I mean, I won't do it with anybody at all if it bothers you. Please let's just go back to how it was before, Haru-chan. You were right, I don't want anything to change."

"Why aren't you listening to me?" Haru snaps. "Just because you're usually right about what I'm thinking doesn't mean you can just ignore stuff I tell you."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," Makoto says, completely bewildered. "But you haven't been telling me anything."

Haru gives him a surly look. "You've had time to get used to having these feelings," he says after a long pause. "I haven't."

These feelings. Does Haru mean--?

"You've probably thought about doing all sorts of things, like kissing and-- and stuff. So doing it might be easy for you, but I've never--" Haru trails off, but Makoto understands what he's trying to say, because he *hasn't* let himself have any such thoughts until yesterday.

"But you looked so scared," Makoto says, blinking. Was he wrong?

"Of course I'm scared," Haru says, meeting Makoto's eyes with a steady gaze. "My head's not right, I feel like I have a fever, but all I want is for you to make me hotter."

Makoto takes a deep breath; it feels like his chest can't expand far enough to keep his heart inside.

"Besides," Haru continues, averting his eyes again. "You're scared of water, but you still love swimming more than anything. So."

"So what?" Makoto asks, remembering yesterday's reprimand.

"So," Haru says. Then he crawls closer to Makoto and straddles him, forcing Makoto to unfold his legs and straighten them so Haru won't slide down his thighs. Haru winds his arms around Makoto's neck and presses their bodies close together. "So don't just decide that you know what I want."

Makoto smooths his hands down Haru's sides. It's an odd sort of comfort, to have Haru's voice coming from slightly above him. "I guess I should remember that you're never going to do anything you don't want to do, huh."

Haru nods mutely, tightens his arms around Makoto's neck, and rests the side of his head against Makoto's. After a few moments, he exhales noisily, the air ruffling Makoto's hair, and

pulls back a little to peer into Makoto's face. Makoto tilts his head towards him and reaches up with one hand to stroke the back of Haru's head as Haru closes the distance and kisses him again, mouth soft and pliant and half-open, but he doesn't deepen the kiss.

It's not reluctance; he's just a little shy -- and it's strange to think of Haru, who thinks nothing of stripping to his swimwear in public, as shy, but Makoto can see how pink Haru's cheeks are when they pull apart between kisses. And that firm, solid object resting against Makoto's belly since a little while ago is definitely not one of Haru's bones; bones don't harden gradually.

He can tell Haru's trying to keep his body rigid so he doesn't rub against Makoto, so he moves his hands to the small of Haru's back and tugs him forward, flexing his stomach muscles at the same time, then does it again.

Haru pulls back and exhales, harsh and long, his eyes half-closed. "If you do that, it'll be a huge mess."

Makoto ignores him. "Haru-chan, open your mouth."

"Don't call me Haru-chan when you say that," Haru breathes. Makoto kisses him deep before he's finished talking, and the last syllable becomes a gasp -- two gasps, from both of them. Makoto forgets everything he was doing and just tries not to moan pathetically as Haru's tongue slides against his, as heat ratchets up and floods his lower belly.

Makoto always thought that the phrase "sweet kiss" meant that anything tastes sweet in the mouth of the one you love. Now he understands that the sweetness is not in the flavour -- it's in the soul-deep contentment coursing through his blood. He reaches up to thread his fingers through Haru's hair and--

The doorbell rings.

"Hello?" Nagisa's cheerful voice calls from outside. "Anyone home? Haru-chan, are you there?"

Makoto exhales at length and starts to release Haru, but Haru grabs his forearms and presses them against his sides. "No. He'll go away."

"Haru-chan," Makoto says with a frown. "Please don't be rude. Nagisa came all the way from the community centre."

"I'll mail him later," Haru says with a look of petulance. He lets go of Makoto's arms and puts his hands on Makoto's shoulders, then pushes his forehead against Makoto's. "Kiss me."

Makoto finds it almost excruciatingly difficult not to close his eyes and let Haru have exactly what he wants, but he knows it won't feel as good if they both feel guilty about ignoring Nagisa. He raises his hands to his shoulders and puts them over Haru's hands. "What if it's something urgent? Nagisa could have called, but instead he came over."

"Maybe he did call," Haru says, his expression somewhat abashed. "I put my phone on silent after you said you were on your way."

Makoto doesn't need to ask why Haru did that. He didn't want to be disturbed while the two of them were together. Just the thought fills him with such elation he tips forward to press his face against Haru's chest, to hide it. "That makes me really happy," he mumbles into Haru's shirt.

The doorbell rings again. "Haru-chan? Hello?"

Haru sighs and gets up from Makoto's lap. The loss of his heat and weight is so sudden that Makoto nearly pulls him back down reflexively.

"Just a minute," Haru calls, just loud enough for it to carry. As he leaves the room, he glances back at Makoto, attempting to look baleful, but his dishevelled hair and bedroom eyes spoil the effect. Makoto can only hope he'll at least try to do something about his hair on his way to the front.

Makoto clicks the TV on, sits down properly, scoots a bit further under the table, and arranges his shirt over the front of his trousers, just in case.

Nothing to see here; just a couple of good old friends watching some early evening television.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> In which Nagisa offers unsolicited career advice and Makoto is forced to reflect on the various possible uses of a bedroom.

"Ah, Mako-chan, you're here too," Nagisa says, entering. "That's good, I was going to ask Haru-chan to call you over if you were free."

Haru's in the kitchen, making a bit more noise with the tea things than he usually would be, but Nagisa doesn't seem to notice. Or perhaps he's aware that Haru is annoyed but is choosing to ignore it. Makoto has never been quite sure what to make of Nagisa: whether he's a little oblivious to others or very skilled at manipulating them. Or both.

"What's up?" Makoto asks. "Did something happen?"

"It's not that something happened," Nagisa says as he sits down across from Makoto. "Yet."

Makoto turns the TV volume all the way down. "Sounds complicated."

Nagisa sighs. "It's Rei-chan. I think he hates me."

"Hates you?" Makoto asks, taken aback. It's difficult to imagine Rei feeling hatred towards anyone, least of all Nagisa.

Haru carries in the tea.

"Wow, that was quick," Makoto says.

Haru glances at him as he sets the sets the cups down. "I already made it before you came." His neck still bears a slight flush, and Makoto's heart beats a little faster.

Haru sits down next to Makoto and addresses Nagisa. "What makes you say Rei hates you?"

Nagisa wraps his hands around his teacup. "He's been avoiding me a lot lately. I'm not sure when it started, but I really noticed after Mako-chan went to Tokyo. Maybe he was already avoiding me before, but I was too busy watching Mako-chan, trying to learn how to be team captain."

I don't think that's anything you need to watch me for, Makoto thinks. He wants to protest that he's not a good captain, that Kou-chan is always scolding him for letting Haru do his own thing all the time -- but they're not here to talk about Makoto's poor leadership skills.

"Now that I think about it, I don't think he's ever really liked me that much," Nagisa says with a heavier sigh. "I kind of pushed him to join the swim club after all."

"I don't think that's the problem," Haru offers. "You're always bullying him; maybe he just got fed up with it finally."

"I don't bully him!" Nagisa protests. "I just tease him a little; I can't help myself. I've never wanted to torment him on purpose."

Haru looks up at him sharply. "Ever asked him if he feels tormented by you?"

Nagisa's eyebrows draw in. "If it's Rei-chan, he would have said something before needing to be asked."

Makoto has been pretending to focus on the TV, where idols are blowing soap bubbles at some sort of a wolf mascot.

Now he understands what's happening. Nagisa's right: Rei's not the type to endure quietly; he's never hesitated to talk about his feelings and doesn't have any trouble putting people on the spot with questions. If it were just a matter of feeling tormented by Nagisa's teasing, Rei would have objected by now. If he's really been avoiding Nagisa, there must be a different reason.

From the moment Nagisa said that he couldn't help but tease Rei, Rei's book has felt oddly heavier in the side pocket of Makoto's cargo shorts. He took the book with him to keep his siblings from accidentally finding it in his bedroom. *So that's how it is for Rei.*

Of course, he can't say anything; it's not his place. "Maybe you should try talking to him," he suggests.

"I know that much!" Nagisa says with a slight pout. "But what if it turns out he really hates me? You guys are going to graduate and it'll be me and Rei-chan running the club together. I don't want him to hate me!"

"You could try being a little nicer to him?" Makoto offers. Maybe if Nagisa treats Rei more kindly, Rei will be encouraged to confess his feelings.

Haru sips his tea. "Just don't be too nice, or he'll think you're creepy."

"I'm not creepy," Nagisa complains.

Haru rolls his eyes. "I didn't *say* you were."

"I agree with Haru," Makoto puts in. "If a person starts behaving in a new way all of a sudden, anyone would think that's strange."

"I guess that's true," Nagisa says. "But how am I supposed to know what's too nice?"

Makoto considers it. "You could do something small, like treat him to a sports drink from the vending machine."

Nagisa brightens. "Or take him out to eat something nice! Like yakiniku! I have my part-time job so I can afford--"

"No, that's creepy," Haru interrupts him, very categorical. "Yakiniku is too expensive."

Nagisa's grin fades.

"Besides, even if Rei doesn't think it's strange, he'll probably just think you need a big favour if you spend that much," Makoto points out, trying to soften the blow. "It's a good idea to go out for a meal together, but don't go overboard."

"I guess you're right," Nagisa says, glancing from Haru to Makoto with a begrudging sort of expression. "No matter how you look at it, a guy taking another guy out for yakiniku for no good reason is weird."

Makoto steals a sidelong look at Haru, who's suddenly become very interested in his tea.

"I mean, it's like I'd be taking him on a date," Nagisa continues cheerfully. "He would hate me even more, right?"

"I'm sure he doesn't really hate you," Makoto says. What does Nagisa mean by 'weird'? Weird as in bad, terrible, disgusting weird, or weird as in 'I know people think it's strange but I'm okay with it'? And why is he so sure Rei would hate it? Could it be--?

"Well, I'll try saying something nice to him first," Nagisa concludes, slapping the table with both hands and causing the teacups to rattle. "You two should open a friendship advice shop."

"What's a friendship advice shop?" Haru asks.

"A place where people pay to get friendship advice," Nagisa explains.

Makoto blinks at him. "People go to such places?"

"Of course they don't; Nagisa's just making things up," Haru says. "I've never seen a friendship advice shop."

"Just because you haven't seen it doesn't mean it doesn't exist," Nagisa says. "Not everyone has friends good enough to talk to, you know." He glances at his watch. "Oh no, I should get going or I'll have to wait an hour for the next train home."

Makoto and Haruka both follow him out to the front entrance.

"Mako-chan, aren't you going home?" Nagisa asks as he straightens up from tying his sneakers.

Makoto realises that it must look very strange, the two of them seeing Nagisa off like this, as if they both live here. "Uh--"

"Makoto's sleeping over," Haru says.

"Aww, I wish I could sleep over too," Nagisa says, looking hopeful.

"You can't," Haru says, a little too quickly. Makoto winces a bit.

"Haru-chan, you're so mean," Nagisa whines. "But you're right; if we're going to have a sleepover then Rei-chan should come too. Well, bye! See you guys at school on Monday!"

Makoto watches Haru bolt the front door behind Nagisa and asks, "Am I sleeping over?"

Haru turns around. "You don't want to?"

Makoto flushes. "I want to."

"Good," Haru says, but he's got the same look on his face that he gets whenever he's near a body of water: he's far away. Makoto can practically hear him calculating the amount of time it will take to undress and submerge.

Must have decided to take one of his baths-that-aren't-real-baths, Makoto thinks resignedly, expecting Haru to turn around and head for the bathroom, but after a few seconds he realises that Haru's eyes aren't distant at all; he's looking at Makoto.

Haru is looking at him as if Makoto is all that matters in the world right now. Long ago, when Makoto's feelings were still new and a little scary, he used to think that he would swim across the sea in a hailstorm for Haru to look at him like this.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Makoto feels as if he's going to cry. He reaches out for Haru's hands and pulls him close, presses their foreheads together. There are words for this feeling, and Makoto wishes he could say them, if only to assure Haru that he hasn't gone crazy, but he can't remember those words. This is where he's wanted to be all along. He doesn't want to stop time so they can stay like this forever; no -- he wants every moment in his life to be like this. Just like this.

"'S wrong?" Haru mutters.

"Everything's already changed," Makoto says, and he's not even sure who he's talking to -- Haru, himself, or just the whole world.

"Is that bad?" Haru asks, moving back a little to look up at him.

Makoto shakes his head and leans in to kiss him -- and it's as though Nagisa never interrupted them; his heart's in his throat and his hands are losing their sweaty grip on Haru's hands.

"Let's go upstairs," Haru says, breathless, when they pull apart. "To my bedroom."

"I-- uh. Okay," Makoto says, confused. They haven't even had supper yet, and Haru wants to go to sleep already? As he follows Haru up the creaky stairs to the second floor, he pulls his phone out and calls his house.

"Mom? I'm staying at Haru-chan's tonight."

"Do you want to come and have dinner with us?" she asks. In the background, there are explosions and dramatic music from the television.

Makoto shakes his head. "No, thanks. We'll manage." *I think.*

"Remember the farmer's market is tomorrow. See if Haru-kun wants to come too. All that boy eats is mackerel! He'll turn into a fish at this rate. You are what you eat!"

"I'll ask him," Makoto promises and hangs up just as they reach Haru's room.

Haru turns in the doorway. "Ask me what?"

"We're going to the farmer's market tomorrow morning, do you want to come with us? Dad's borrowing a coworker's minivan so there's room for six."

"I'll go," Haru says with a nod. "Why are you standing out there for, by the way? Come in."

Makoto rubs the back of his head and smiles with embarrassment. "I, uh-- I'm not really sleepy? Plus I was hoping we could eat something. You don't have to cook or anything! We can just go out for some beef bowls, or-- or something." Makoto's voice gets weaker as Haru's look of absolute incredulity intensifies. *What did I say wrong?*

"Makoto."

"Y-yes?"

"Are you being serious right now?"

"About food? Why wouldn't I be serious?"

"No, do you seriously think I wanted to come here so we could go to sleep?"

"But it's your bedroom-- oh." *Oh*. Makoto blushes.

Haru goes to take his hand but catches the flap of the side pocket on Makoto's shorts. The fastener's just a simple metal clip, so it comes open, revealing the little blue-covered book Rei gave Makoto.

"What book is that?" Haru asks, eyebrows raised. "Light novel?"

Makoto wishes he could lie, but it's pointless; Haru always knows. And Makoto doesn't exactly have a habit of walking around with light novels in his pockets. He pulls the book out and hands it to Haru. "It's Rei's. He, um. He figured it out. How I feel about you. And he already had this book; he thought it would help me."

Haru peers at the front cover, and his eyes widen. They widen further as he turns to a couple of random pages.

"I-- I wasn't going to read it or anything! I just didn't want Ren and Ran to find it," Makoto explains.

Haru hands the book back to him. "So that's why you looked like you had a big secret when Nagisa was here."

Makoto secures the book in his pocket again. "I did?"

"Rei likes Nagisa, right?" Haruka asks with a slight shrug. "That's why he's been distant. He even got this pornography to learn about sex."

"It's not pornography," Makoto says, a bit defensive though he's not even sure why. "If you look at it properly you'll see."

Haru waves him off. "Why would I look at a book when you're right here?"

Makoto's face feels so very hot that he's sure steam's about to start escaping through his ears, like in the cartoons. "But Haru-chan, I-- I don't know what I'm doing."

"So what? Neither do I. If that stopped people from trying, nobody would ever have sex," Haru points out, pulling Makoto in through the doorway.

They stand next to Haru's bed, facing each other. Makoto's sweating so profusely he needs approximately sixteen showers -- right now, even though he just took a shower before coming here. He really didn't think this whole thing through. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he regrets not having read Rei's book cover to cover before coming over.

"I got too nervous," he mumbles. "And sweaty. I bet I stink."

"You don't," Haru says. "Do I?"

Makoto shakes his head. It wouldn't matter to him even if Haru smelled like a long-haul trucker after a ten-hour non-stop trip of peeing into bottles and dripping stale convenience store hot dog mustard on the front of his shirt.

Haru pulls his head down for a kiss, and Makoto forgets about truckers, misgivings, and Rei's book. Haru's breathing is harsh, and the way he leans into Makoto with his whole body, it's obvious that he means business. This demanding side of Haru has always excited Makoto more than he wants to admit, and he didn't expect to see it in this kind of situation. He palms Haru's ass with one hand and pulls him closer, drawing a tiny growl from Haru that almost makes Makoto lose his grip on reality.

Haru slides his hands under Makoto's shirt and runs his thumbs along the waistband of his shorts. Makoto strokes the side of Haru's neck with the back of his hand, his other hand tightening on Haru's ass. It's so good. They've touched each other hundreds of times, but never like this, just to feel, to hear the other's breath hitch. Makoto puts both hands on Haru's backside and tugs on his board shorts; they come down easily and drop to the floor. He puts his hands back on Haru's ass, expecting him to still be wearing his swimming gear but he isn't.

Makoto's so shocked that he breaks the kiss to look -- and sees that he'd pulled both Haru's shorts and boxers down at the same time. He gulps, looking down. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean

to." Haru's bigger than he expected when hard, and Makoto wonders how close he is.

"Don't stare," Haru grumbles, moving in closer, as if to hide.

"No, um, is it okay if I-- if I touch it? Your p-penis," Makoto manages, and his face burns so hot he can probably serve as the stove if they decide to have supper now.

"Don't call it *penis*, you sound like our biology teacher," Haru says. He's stuck his nose against the top of Makoto's shoulder and his voice sounds a little like it's coming from the bottom of a barrel.

"Please don't say things that kill the mood, Haru-chan," Makoto complains. Their biology teacher is a middle-aged man with terrible body odour and a permanent case of seaweed teeth.

Haru bites down gently on Makoto's shoulder through his shirt. "Don't call me Haru-chan while touching my dick."

"I'm not touching it," Makoto protests, squeezing Haru's butt for emphasis.

"Why aren't you?" Haru whispers, lifting his head to meet Makoto's eyes.

Makoto kisses him and corrects the error. It feels strange but also familiar, and though he's awkward at first, it doesn't seem to matter to Haruka, who begins to pant harshly as Makoto wraps his fingers around him. His tiny gasps increase in urgency and the way his tongue moves becomes almost mechanical, like all his attention is somewhere else. Haru's hips jerk upwards almost violently -- once, twice. Makoto tightens his hold and lets Haru use his fist, kissing along his jawline instead of his mouth; his own excitement has reached a level where he's about to forget how breathing works. When Haru shudders against him, Makoto thinks about using the hand now wet with Haru's release to finish himself off, and just the idea is enough to -- well. He grinds desperately against Haru's hip, his knees shake, his chest seizes, and it's a wonder he manages to remain standing.

It's not the best orgasm he's ever had, but it's the first one he's had with Haru, not his own hand, and that makes it wonderful.

"Let me do you," Haru says. His sweaty face is still smooshed against Makoto's collarbone.

"That's okay," Makoto says, his voice a little squeaky and rough. "It, um. Kind of already happened." He laughs, embarrassed. Haru steps back a bit and gives him a tiny smile. Makoto doesn't think he's ever been happier, even though his underwear is kind of squishy and gross. And he's just absentmindedly wiped Haru's come on the front of his shirt. "Oops."

"Rinse it with cold water and then I'll stick it in the washer with some other stuff," Haru offers, casting a critical eye over the damage. "It'll be dry by morning. You're staying here anyway."

"Speaking of which, I'm hungry," Makoto says.

Haru looks hopeful. "Mackerel?"

"Anything."

[tbc]

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which the second verse is better than the first, and a radish is not a dog. Or a rabbit.

Haru heads downstairs to the kitchen, and Makoto squats in front of the dresser next to the door and opens the bottom drawer, where various articles of Makoto's clothing can usually be found. Things left behind when he used to sleep over more often; things he'd taken off when borrowing Haru's shower after a run and Haru later washed but never remembered to bring over. There's a similar drawer in Makoto's room, and only now does it strike him that this is such a couple thing, isn't it: drawer space. The back of Makoto's neck gets tingly all over again.

He can't find any underwear, but there's a pair of drawstring shorts that'll have to do. They'll be going to bed soon enough; the farmer's market is an hour away by car, and they'll have to leave early to get there before the big Sunday crowds hit. He digs up an old T-shirt that he hopes will still fit. His final growth spurt came and went in middle school, but he's added a lot of muscle over the past year. Makoto extracts Rei's book from the pocket of his shorts and sets it on top of the dresser to make sure he doesn't accidentally get it wet. Clothes and a fresh towel from the linen closet in hand, he heads downstairs to the bathroom.

He ends up hand-washing his… compromised clothes using hand soap instead of just rinsing them out in the sink. He feels bad enough about having made such a mess without making Haru wash his clothes for him, too. Then he takes a shower to clean himself up.

Makoto likes to let his mind go blank and drift away when showering, but he can't seem to find that place any more. Just forty-eight hours ago, he was getting ready to go to bed on his last night in Tokyo, eager to see Haru again but sure that Haru only thinks of Rin. Logic foreshadowed a long time, years maybe, of carrying that secret fracture across his heart.

And now, everything has changed, yet it remains the same. Even after having put his tongue in Makoto's mouth and letting Makoto touch him in a place friends weren't supposed to touch each other, Haru is still Haru. And even after doing such things to Haru, Makoto feels like he's stumbling along a lifelike dreamscape, like everything could vanish in a moment. He doesn't doubt Haru's feelings, but he can't understand why Haru would have them. He has always understood very well that Haru finds him only slightly less annoying than he finds everyone else; this is hardly the stuff of heart-stopping romance.

Sure, Haru said, in his own way, that he missed Makoto, so is it just a case of not knowing what you've got until it's gone? Does it mean Haru will get tired of this kind of thing soon and they'll go back to a hands-off kind of relationship? Just the thought makes Makoto so sad that a lump forms in his throat. Doesn't that make him a terrible friend? If he's this upset just

thinking about Haru getting tired of physical affection, after barely getting close in the first place, could it be he doesn't really love Haru?

Makoto rinses the last of the soap away and wishes he were more like Nagisa. If it were him, he could stop thinking about these things and just accept everything happily. Then again, maybe Nagisa worries as much as Makoto does. Who can really tell what's going on in someone's head? If he has questions for Haru, he should just ask them, the same way he always does. They are friends before they're anything else.

The shirt he grabbed turns out to be a bit small, but wearable.

He wanders out into the kitchen but Haru's not there. Food for two is set out on the living room table -- grilled mackerel, rice, slices of pickled eggplant, instant miso soup, but no Haru here, either. Makoto scratches his head, climbs the stairs to Haru's room -- and finds him lying on the bed, leafing through Rei's book as he holds it up with one outstretched arm.

"There you are," Makoto says with a grin. "So you *were* interested in that."

Haru favours him with a sidelong glance. "I never said I wasn't interested at all. Just not right then."

Makoto walks over to sit on the edge of the bed and cranes his neck to look at the opened pages -- both are solid text.

"You took a while," Haru says, closing the book before Makoto can read anything. "Don't tell me you washed your things by hand."

"I felt bad about making you do it," Makoto replies, watching Haru turn sideways and stretch his arm out to put the book down on the headboard next to the alarm clock. Haru's liquid grace always stops his breath when he least expects it, in the water or out of it. Haru's shirt has hiked up his torso, and all Makoto wants is to press his mouth against the exposed skin. He's really done for, isn't he?

Haru's staring at him. Makoto starts to get up and say they should go and eat dinner before it gets cold, but Haru grabs his forearm. "Come closer."

Makoto does; he doesn't care about dinner any more. He's always found it a bit bewildering how Haru would spend all his time submerged in some kind of body of water if he could, but he thinks he understands a little better now. It isn't possible to ever grow tired of Haru's kisses, of Haru's hands on his face, on his back, beneath his too-tight shirt.

He starts out sitting on the bed and bending over Haru; somehow he ends up on his back, with Haru half on top of him. The world outside the window is starting to take a turn towards twilight but it feels like an alien planet seven galaxies away.

Haru pulls far enough away that Makoto can no longer feel his breath. "Your f-face," he says.

Makoto peers up at him. "My face?"

Haru nods, not meeting Makoto's eyes. "Earlier. I didn't see your face, when you, um. Finished." He blushes.

"I'm sorry. I-- Next time--?" *Next time?* Of all the presumptuous--

Haru rubs his nose with his palm open so it covers his mouth. "Now. Let me see it now."

Makoto's cheeks flame. "Even if you say that, I don't even know what kind of face I made--"

He receives a look of such reproach that he understands. "You-- already? Again?"

Haru's eyebrows shoot up; his eyes cut to Makoto's lower body, as if to say, *I'm not the only one here, you know.*

"Okay, yeah," Makoto says, glancing down at his shorts, which would appear to be attempting to defy gravity if one did not know what was under them. "Guilty as charged." He wonders if this kind of stuff ever gets easier to talk about.

Haru straddles Makoto's thighs and pushes his shirt up to his armpits, gives Makoto a kiss that's almost perfunctory as he loosens the drawstring on Makoto's shorts and lowers them over Makoto's cock. Haru wraps his hand around it once, squeezes, lets go, and then sits back slowly, his hand splayed against Makoto's stomach.

Makoto doesn't think he can stand the sight of Haru *looking* at him down there, not without imploding. He bites his lip and turns his head to the side. He's never been so embarrassed or turned on, and he just hopes he can get through it without making any weird noises. He'd like to cover his face with his forearm, but Haru said he wanted to see it.

Earlier, it was all a bit confused, hurried -- now, Haru's touches are so intense, as if he cares for nothing except making Makoto feel good. If he'd done this before, Makoto wouldn't have lasted three seconds. Haru's first hesitant caresses are as clumsy at first as Makoto's were -- it all feels a bit off-kilter until you get used to the reverse grip. Haru gets used to it quicker than Makoto did, and the things he does with his fingertips have got to be illegal in several municipalities.

Makoto reaches out, and Haru bends down over him for a kiss, using his free arm for support. It feels so nice that Makoto's exhale turns into a moan, and Haru's grip on him tightens. Makoto fumbles blindly at Haru's shorts, trying to get them out of the way, wanting to touch Haru again, and Haru wiggles his hips a bit to help until his shorts are halfway down his thighs. Makoto looks into Haru's eyes and reaches for him, but Haru shakes his head. He lets go of Makoto, scoots forward, and leans over so that his cock slides against Makoto's.

Makoto's not sure if it's the whisper-soft skin, the delicate way it curves, the heat it radiates, or the hardness -- or a bit of all of he above, but the feeling is electric, shocking -- it's so much more than Haru's hand, and his exhale is so sharp and loud it startles him. He looks into Haru's eyes and tries to find something to say, but Haru's eyes are so dark and intense that words slip beyond reach.

Haru closes his hand around both of them and leans down to kiss Makoto again. Makoto puts both arms around Haru's shoulders, losing himself in the wet heat of their joined mouths, the sweet ache blossoming in his lower belly. Haru's hand has gone all but limp; his hips are doing most of the work, and Makoto drives himself half insane wishing for a mirror on the ceiling so he can see Haru move, not just feel him.

Reluctantly, he breaks the kiss. "I'm gonna--" he grits out, and Haru rises a little to look at him. Makoto still feels mortified but he *wants* to show Haru what he wanted to see. He wants to give Haru whatever he desires, no matter how embarrassing or strange. The feeling mingles with the pressure mounting in his groin -- and Makoto arches up and comes, trying to say Haru's name but only managing the first syllable. Haru goes still as Makoto messily splatters his own belly. Once Makoto's stopped moving, Haru sits up. Makoto reaches for him, and this time Haru lets him.

It takes Haru another minute to finish. Makoto's glad he went first; his good sense returning means he notices all the little things that happen as Haru's about to come -- his breathing turns rapid and shallow, his lips part as his head tips back, his hips snap forward and lock in place, and his fingers curl into fists around the sheets on either side of him. The sound he makes as he reaches the pinnacle -- a soft gasp that stops just short of a moan -- ought to be a national treasure.

Haru collapses on top of Makoto and sticks his nose into the pillow that's travelled from underneath Makoto's head and to his left.

"Makoto?" he whispers, sounding like he's barely breathing.

Makoto turns his head and kisses Haru's cheek, hesitant. "What is it? Are you okay?"

"Don't show that face to anyone else," Haru says, opening one eye to look at him.

He looks so determined that Makoto's chest swells. Was he really worried that Haru was going to get bored? He smiles, wishing that a mere smile could communicate how happy Haru just made him. "I won't."

Haru closes his eye again and expels a long, long breath. "Sorry if that was a weird thing to say." He sits back up without waiting for an answer, pulls a box of tissues out from under the bed near the window, and hands it to Makoto. "Next time we should just not wear any clothes," he remarks, studying the stain on his shirt.

Makoto has no idea which one of them put it there. He mops his belly with a tissue, torn between admiring how cool Haru is acting all of a sudden and rolling away to hide his face because Haru just said there would be a next time.

Once they're both cleaned up, they return downstairs to reheat dinner in the microwave and eat it while watching TV.

"I'm going to take a bath," Haru says afterwards. "I can't calm down."

Makoto nods as he gathers up the dishes for washing. It stings a little, what Haru just said. Makoto has always been the one who could calm Haru down, before. For several weeks after Grandma Nanase died, Haru used to call Makoto's cell and say nothing. Makoto would cradle the phone between his ear and shoulder and continue going about his business, listening to Haru breathe on the other end. Eventually, Haru would mutter, *thanks* and hang up. He never explained himself. The first couple of those calls were frustrating for Makoto; he kept trying to get Haru to speak, but he soon figured out that Haru just didn't want to be alone, yet at the same time he didn't want to interact, or have anyone else next to him.

I can't have both, Makoto thinks, wiping his hands with the kitchen towel. *I can either calm him down or rile him up; I can't do both at once.*

He turns off the television and goes back upstairs and spends fifteen minutes standing next to the closet and wondering if he should get the futon out. It's probably safe to assume Haru wants to sleep together with him, since that was what he wanted yesterday at Makoto's place. But then again, Haru did say that he couldn't calm down, so maybe he'd prefer to sleep separately so they don't end up all over each other again.

The thought sends a small shiver down Makoto's back, and he slides the closet door open to pull out the futon. Being able to stay calm has always been extremely important to Haru -- Makoto doesn't want to become a source of resentment. It scares him a little, how completely lust took him over when they were intimate, and he imagines that goes triple for Haru if he feels even a fraction of what Makoto feels.

He lays the futon out behind the bed, sets the alarm, climbs in, and falls asleep within minutes.

Makoto wakes to moonlight streaming through the gap in the curtains and Haru curled up against his back, Haru's arm resting on his waist. *So much for my powers of deduction,* Makoto thinks. He hits the backlight button on his watch, which he forgot to take off -- way too early to get up.

He pulls Haru's arm tighter around himself and goes back to sleep.

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"Haru, look at this radish!" Ran cries, waving at the two of them. "Doesn't it look like a rabbit?"

Haru inspects it. "I think it looks like a dog," he says. "Rabbits have longer ears."

"Mom, can we buy this rabbit radish?" Ran calls, bouncing away.

"Your opinion has been thoroughly rejected," Makoto says, glancing at Haru, who shrugs.

"Whether it's a dog or a rabbit, it's a radish in the end."

Makoto snorts. "If only our classics teacher could hear you now."

"Did I say something classic?"

"I'd call it philosophical."

Haru rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "It's a radish."

Makoto peers up at the clouds rolling in from the west. "I want to show you something," he says, but realises that Haru has left his side. He's already three stalls down stuffing a bunch of giant leeks into his canvas shopping bag.

Makoto wrinkles his nose. "Gross."

"Nutritious," Haru corrects him. "You're the one who's always on my case about eating properly."

"No, that's my mom," Makoto objects. "I let you eat all the mackerel you want."

"But you don't approve," Haru says with a dismissive gesture. "What did you want to show me?"

Makoto looks at him, startled. "I thought you couldn't hear me."

Haru flushes slightly. "I was listening."

"Let's get some shaved ice and I'll show you."

They make their way to the food stalls, which are just starting to open -- the Tachibanas and Haru arrived early enough to get most of their shopping done. This way they'll be home before lunchtime and Makoto will have time to get ready for school, since he's done almost nothing since returning on Friday but moon over Haru. And he doesn't really feel like stopping that, but he's got to pull himself together long enough to at least get his notebooks ready. Both he and Haru are on the brink of the last six months of high school.

Once they both have their orders -- lemon-flavoured for Haru, strawberry for Makoto -- Makoto steers them towards the picnic table directly across from the ice stall.

Makoto takes a look around and takes a seat, setting his ice cup down on the table. Haru follows suit.

"Three years ago," Makoto says. "It was a sunny day and we were talking about going back for the last term of middle school, do you remember?" Well, he was talking. Haru was eating his shaved ice -- lime-flavoured at that time -- and looking vaguely irritated, like Makoto was interrupting some important thought process.

"Kind of," Haru says. "We come here every year though."

"That time was special." Makoto points to a beaten-up sign at the side of the rock-strewn pathway leading from the market area to the food stalls. "Ren was trying to dig that sign out of the ground and you went to stop him."

"Oh," Haru says. "I remember." He's just taken a spoonful of shaved ice and the spoon's still in his mouth as he speaks. "He said it was too old and if he hid it, they'd put up a new one."

"You went over there and crouched next to my brother," Makoto says, his heart beginning to pound so furiously that he has to take a deep breath before he continues. "And you smiled. I don't know why you did that day of all days. But I felt so happy I thought my head was going to explode."

Haru takes the spoon out of his mouth and gives Makoto a surprised look. "Happy?"

"Because you were smiling. You don't smile that often, so when you do, it's special."

"It's not really," Haru says with a frown. "I'm just--"

"I know, Haru-chan," Makoto interrupts. "I know. What I'm trying to say is that was the moment I knew I was in love with you. You're the only one whose smile makes me happy no matter who you're smiling at."

[tbc]

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> In which Makoto discovers that holding hands can be a lot harder than one imagines. Also, buttercream frosting makes a not entirely surprising reappearance.

"I know that you already know," Makoto hurries to add when Haru's expression begins to change. "I know you've known for a while. I don't-- I don't expect anything from you." He pokes at his shaved ice with the spoon, digging a little hole in the middle and pushing down to watch the syrup drench through the broken latticework of ice slivers. "I just felt like telling you, since we might not come here again like this," he says.

Haru bumps Makoto with his shoulder. He's also staring into his ice cup intently. "I didn't know it was that long ago, for you."

Makoto's somewhat desperate to ask how long ago it was for Haru, but he's not sure he wants to hear the answer, since it's likely to be *last week*. He sticks some ice into his mouth, enough to need to stop talking or risk dribbling sugary melt on his shirt.

"I felt weird about doing it, back then," Haru says after they spend a few minutes silently spooning ice into their mouths.

"Y-yeah?" Makoto says, not sure what Haru's talking about. He's been thinking that all the people around them should look away long enough for him to steal a kiss and find out what Haru's tongue feels like when it's ice-cold.

"Mouth-to-mouth," Haru clarifies.

Did Haru just read my mind for real? Makoto gets ready to feel a little spooked.

But no, Haru's facial expression is earnest and serious, not… intense, the way it gets when Haru looks at Makoto with physical intent. Mouth-to-mouth would have to be as in CPR, not kissing; Haru didn't have a problem calling it kissing before, and while there are people milling about, none are close enough to hear them over the market noises. So he's not trying to speak in code. *Haru felt weird... back then... about doing... mouth-to-mouth.*

"Do you mean that time I ran into the ocean to save Rei and lost my nerve?" Makoto ventures. "At that training camp last year?"

Haru nods and gives his shaved ice a forceful stir. "If it's just CPR, it shouldn't bother me who it is unless, you know. I want to do that kind of thing with that person."

Makoto's heart begins to beat rapidly again. "H-Haru-chan, are you saying you have-- since *then*?"

Haru meets his eyes briefly. "Since before that, but I never realised it until then." He discovers something fascinating in the picnic table top. "Maybe since always," he whispers, but his voice is so quiet that Makoto can't be sure that's what he said.

Makoto loses all interest in dessert and pitches the half-full shaved ice container into the rubbish bin next to the picnic table. He doesn't know what to say. He feels dismayed that they could've spent the last year becoming closer instead of growing apart. And it's *his* fault. He should have said something sooner.

"I noticed you started to become weird around that time. I thought it was because you figured me out," Haru says, staring ahead at the sign that once invoked Ren's wrath. "I thought it grossed you out, so you were keeping your distance."

"No, I just thought you had feelings for Rin," Makoto explains, unnecessarily.

"I know that *now*."

"I could never be grossed out by you," Makoto says. "By anything about you."

Mischief flits across Haru's expression. "Wanna put that to the test?"

Makoto sighs and gives Haru a disapproving look. "Maybe not."

Now he's really wishing everyone would just look elsewhere all at once, just long enough for him to take Haru's free hand resting on the bench between them and squeeze it.

You've had time to get used to having these feelings. I haven't.

Haru said that yesterday, didn't he? Not long before Nagisa showed up. And Makoto realises that Haru must have done the same thing he did: just not let himself think about Makoto in that way. And he assumes that Makoto did think about Haru in that way.

"I never thought about… doing stuff with you, by the way," he says, deciding that since they are having this conversation, he had better clear that part up. "I didn't think it was right to, um... use you, I guess. Even if you didn't know."

Haru blushes and lifts the container all the way to his mouth and begins shoving ice into his mouth as though it were rice.

"Makoto! Haru!" Ran is bounding towards them from the direction of the market stalls. "I wanted to eat shaved ice too!" She climbs onto the bench between Makoto and Haru and gives them each an annoyed look.

Makoto smiles at her. "Then it can't be helped. Come on, I'll get you some."

Ren, who appears to have been tailing his sister even though they had a fight yesterday and weren't speaking to each other, turns up a few moments later to demand shaved ice. Makoto's

parents find the four of them a short while later and it's time to go home.

Since Ren and Ran have made up, Makoto gets to sit with Haru this time. He reaches back around Haru's shopping bag -- that didn't fit in the trunk and has to ride on the seat between them -- and pulls Haru's hand behind it. Haru squeezes his fingers back, and they spend the rest of the trip staring out of their respective windows and playing *shiritori* with the kids.

Haru doesn't let go of Makoto's hand until they pull up to the parking lot at the end of their street.

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"All ready for school?" Mom asks as they're clearing up after supper.

"Yes," Makoto says, making an effort to drag his thoughts away from the street outside, the stairs, the shrine, Haru. "Ran and Ren helped me put the stickers on my notebooks."

He promptly regrets saying it because just as earlier, thinking about the stickers transports him to Haru's living room, to yesterday, to-- no, he needs to pull himself together.

"What about Haru's stickers?" Ran asks. "Did he like them? I forgot to ask you before."

"Yes," Makoto tells her. "I helped him put them on yesterday." He wishes he hadn't opened his big mouth about the stickers at all.

"Is everything all right, Mako-kun?" Mom asks, leaning forward to peer into his eyes. "You have been a little… out of it since you came back from Tokyo. Did something go wrong there?"

"I--" Makoto almost starts to tell her about Haru, but he just can't. "I'm a little worried about entrance exams. They're pretty soon after all. Working at the clinic was a real reminder that I won't be in high school or be able to rely on you and Dad forever." Not a word of that is a lie, but he still feels crappy for not telling her everything.

She smiles. "It's true that you won't be in high school forever, but you can rely on me and Dad for as long as you want."

"No matter what?" Makoto blurts, unable to help himself.

"Y-yes?" Her expression turns concerned.

"What if he turns out to be the evil pirate Arlong?" Ren asks, stepping up to the sink and adding two glasses to the mix.

Mom laughs. "I think we can safely say Mako-kun isn't Arlong."

"Arlong's dead anyway," Ran points out as she drops cutlery into the sink with a great deal of metallic clattering.

Makoto turns on the tap and starts washing the dishes, humming to himself, as if the conversation was already over. His mom stands behind him for a few moments, and Makoto cringes inwardly, waiting for her to ask more questions that he won't be able to evade. But she just pats his shoulder and joins Dad in the living room. The twins follow, shouting at each other about pirates.

Makoto's never had any secrets from his family before. It makes him feel like a traitor, even though nobody in their right mind expects high schoolers to share everything with their parents. But would he be feeling like this if he had fallen for some girl in his class?

It's difficult to imagine, because Makoto can't think of any good reasons to fall for anyone except Haru. *What if Haru were a girl to start with?* It could have been the case, after all -- the swim club they went to in elementary school was mixed-gender, and it was swimming that really brought them together. So if Nanase Haruka had been a woman-like name attached to a girl exactly like Makoto's Haru?

Makoto wishes he could instantly know the answer, but he's not sure if he would have fallen for Haru if he were a girl. He's never thought about girls like that. Until just now, it never even occurred to him that this was something he needed to consider.

But if he were attracted to women, and if Haru were a girl, and things unfolded between them the same way they did? Why, he'd tell his mother as soon as he could.

So why can't he do it when Haru isn't a girl? No marriage, no grandchildren, living on the far-flung fringes of society no matter how respectable a job he gets. Are those things important to his parents or does Mom really mean it when she says he can rely on her no matter what?

Makoto wipes his hands and goes upstairs; he doesn't think he can pretend like everything's business as usual; not just now. He looks at his school bag on top of the desk, all ready for tomorrow morning.

Then he remembers that he left Rei's book at Haru's house, and his resolve not to go over to Haru's today -- which he thought would be best, to give each other some breathing room -- evaporates. Just this flimsy excuse to go and see Haru is enough to make him vibrate with excitement. Two minutes later, he's out the door.

But Haru isn't home. He's not in his room, in the bathtub, or in his living room, so he must have gone to the pool at school. Makoto goes back to Haru's room to retrieve Rei's book at least but he can't find it. It was on the dresser… no, that was where Makoto put it before showering. Ah, Haru was reading it in bed and then put it on the headboard -- but the book isn't there, either. Makoto peers under the bed and finds nothing except an old storage box. He lies down on his stomach and crawls under to feel near the back of the bed, but nothing there, either.

"What are you doing?" Haru asks behind him.

Makoto tries to straighten up, forgets that he's under the bed, and bumps his head against the underside. "Ouch!"

He climbs out, a little dustier for the wear and with a faintly throbbing skull; both items pale in comparison to Haru's look of barely held-in amusement. Makoto is tempted to climb back under and repeat the gag on the faint hope that Haru might smile next time around.

"I was just looking for Rei's book," he explains.

"I was reading it," Haru says. "It's downstairs. Do you have to give it back to him?"

"I didn't say if I would or wouldn't, but he did ask me to put it in his shoe locker tomorrow."

"It's pretty interesting if you forget that the main character's an idiot," Haru says. "Did you know it's a bad idea to put buttercream frosting on your dick?"

"I-- guess that makes sense?" Sugar in any place where bacteria hang out is always a bad idea. "But why would anyone want to do such a thing in the first place? You can't eat a-- oh." Makoto's face burns hotter than the sun. Haru bites his lip.

"Anyway," Makoto says, trying not to laugh out loud at himself. "If you want to finish reading it, I'm sure Rei won't mind. I won't tell him you have it."

"You can tell him, I don't care if he knows."

Makoto's smile freezes on his face. "Really?"

Haru meets his gaze. "I want everyone to know." As Makoto's eyes widen and eyebrows shoot up, he continues: "I know that it would be bad if everyone really knew. I'm not saying we should tell everyone."

Makoto swallows hard. "I wish we could," he says.

Haru takes a hesitant step towards him, and another, and then he gets close enough to twine his arms around Makoto's midsection and leans in close when Makoto hugs him back. This way, he isn't afraid of anything. Not the consequences of telling his parents and friends; not even the prospect of life as an outsider.

"Let's go feed the cats," Haru says after a short while.

"Just a little longer," Makoto mumbles into his hair. "Let's stay like this."

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> In which life doesn't play fair, holding hands is still rough, and Nagisa still needs sensitivity training.

*

"I wonder where Mackerel Five is," Haru says as the two of them watch the shrine cats converge on the food he's set out. "I haven't seen him in a few nights."

Haru's named all the cats Mackerel because according to him, coming up with different names is a pain. Mackerel Five showed up at the shrine a little over a year ago when it was still a tiny white kitten.

"Maybe someone else has been feeding him," Makoto suggests. "Unlike the rest of them, he's very friendly towards people."

"These cats are friendly," Haru says, sitting down on the porch next to Makoto and letting the four cats surround the plate.

"They're friendly because they know us. They're not very nice to strangers."

Haru considers this for a few moments and nods in a somewhat teacherly way, as if Makoto's just given the correct answer against all expectations.

The cats finish their dinner, come over to receive head rubs, and scamper away into the bushes.

"I should head home," Makoto says after the last fluffy tail has vanished in the gathering shadows.

Haru gives him a troubled glance and looks away quickly.

Could he have been hoping that Makoto would stay over again? Makoto knows he'll never ask, so he explains. "It's the last time the twins will get to see me off to a new term at school. They've been really excited about it."

Haru looks back at him. "Okay."

"Why don't you come over?" Makoto offers.

Haru shakes his head. "I've still got homework to finish."

Makoto sighs. "Haru-chan, you didn't do your summer homework *again*?"

"I did most of it," Haru protests. "I just left the easy boring stuff for later and kept forgetting."

"Need any help?"

"I'm good," Haru says. "The last time, huh?" He turns to look at the streetlamp beyond the yard fence, where a large moth is flying about, frantic and so fast it's painting shapes across the light, shapes that vanish in half a blink.

Makoto gazes at the moth, then at Haru's profile, and it occurs to him that for the first time since coming back from Tokyo, he feels at ease with Haru by his side, and it's such a relief. He was afraid he was always going to be losing his train of thought and trying not to say anything too silly or embarrassing. But he is safe here; everything is how it should be. Regret does linger for all the time they wasted by making the wrong assumptions and not talking to each other, but he's sure it will dissipate.

Haru turns to look at him. "It'll be the last term opening ceremony for us too."

"Does that mean you're going to attend for a change?" Makoto asks. "You've been calling in sick ever since first year."

"I'll go," Haru says. "Even though it's just the semester opener."

Makoto smiles. "I'll wait for you on the steps, then. Maybe Mackerel Five will come out to see us off like he used to."

He gets to his feet, but before he can say anything else, Haru reaches up and grabs his pant leg.

"Haru?"

"Goodnight kiss," Haru says, staring at the ground.

Everything is how it should be, Makoto thinks again as he kneels down in front of Haru and leans in. He doesn't mean for it to be the kind of kiss that'll get them in trouble, but Haru's lips part before he's even halfway there, and Makoto's in a world of trouble.

"That's not a goodnight kiss, that's a 'let's have a good time tonight' kiss," Makoto complains, panting as he pulls away. "You're not playing fair." There is nothing he would rather do except stay here, but if they end up like they did yesterday, he won't be able to just up and go home after.

"Life doesn't play fair," Haru deadpans. His gaze shifts to Makoto's left, and his expression changes to surprise.

A large white cat sits next to the empty plate, tail curled around its hindquarters: Mackerel Five. He wears a look of mild grandfatherly disapproval, as if to say, *I do not know what you humans are up to but I'd appreciate it if you could do something immediately about your shoddy hospitality.*.

*

The next day's lunchtime finds Makoto and Haru on the school roof with Rei and Nagisa.

"I want to go home," Haru announces. "First day is a waste of time just as I thought it would be."

"But wasn't it nice to listen to the principal with everyone?" Makoto asks, unwrapping his lunch box. He's very aware of Rei seated to his right -- as far away from Nagisa as possible.

"You have weird hobbies, Mako-chan," Nagisa pipes up. "What's nice about that old dude?"

"All of the teachers, really," Haru insists. "It's like 'exams' is the only word they know all of a sudden."

"It can't be helped," Makoto says. "We're getting a lot closer."

"I don't envy you, having to take the the entrance exams," Rei says. "But at the same time, I'm kind of jealous that you two get to experience that so soon."

"Hey, Rei-chan?" Nagisa says, peering around Haru, who's unwrapping his yakisoba bread.

Rei's face loses a bit of colour. He adjusts his glasses. "Yes, what is it, Nagisa-kun?"

Nagisa leans forward. "Will you go out with me?"

Rei, who was in the middle of taking a sip of bottled tea, makes a noise like an angry cat and begins coughing violently as Makoto drops his chopsticks and slaps his back.

"Oh, crap, I mean for food! For some food! As friends!" Nagisa shouts, gesticulating. "I was thinking one thing and said something totally different!"

"Great job, Nagisa," Haru puts in. "You broke Rei."

Once Rei gets himself back under control, he addresses Nagisa without looking at him. "I don't understand why I must accompany you to a food service establishment."

He sounds so stiff that Makoto has to wonder if he got the wrong idea about the object of Rei's fascination. Maybe Rei likes a completely different person, and his distance from Nagisa really is down to being unhappy with Nagisa's teasing.

But Haru thought Rei has a crush on Nagisa, too, and Haru's rarely wrong about that sort of thing. *Except when it comes to his own feelings.*

"Well…" Nagisa says, scooting closer to face Rei. "You'll be helping me out as vice-captain from now on, so I want to treat you as a whatchamacallit. Ah, to thank you in advance, basically!"

Rei pushes his glasses up with his whole hand covering his face. "Um. Well -- isn't it a bit rude to invite me out like this and not invite Haruka-senpai and Makoto-senpai?"

Nagisa waves a hand. "They're not going to be vice-captains, are they?"

"Even so, you shouldn't just invite me out when they're here like this," Rei says. "You should think about other people's feelings, Nagisa-kun."

"I got scolded again," Nagisa whines. "Okay, fine, we can all go together if that's what you want. But I'm only buying Rei-chan's food."

Makoto has to struggle not to put his face into his hands. At least Nagisa had the presence of mind not to tell Rei that the whole food outing thing came from the Nanase-Tachibana Friendship Advice Shop.

"Nagisa, you're an idiot," Haru says, but so quietly that only Makoto can hear him.

*

"Rei, wait up!" Makoto calls. There's still a bit of time until class starts, and he wanted to make sure to get Rei alone, so he followed Rei and Nagisa until Nagisa split off for his own classroom.

Rei turns around with a startled expression. "Makoto-senpai? How long have you--"

"Never mind that," Makoto says. "I just wanted to tell you. About the book. I'll-- ah. I'll return it a little later, if that's all right…?"

Rei opens his mouth to respond, but Haru materialises at Makoto's side and interjects. "Where did you find that book, anyway? I've never seen books like that at the store."

"Haru," Makoto whines, drawing out the second syllable. *He must have been following me as I followed Rei. From friendship advice shop to detective agency; we're a couple of busy guys.*

Rei's mouth drops open. "Don't tell me you-- er-- did you two--?"

Makoto blushes. Haru turns his head aside; if he tips forward just a little, his nose will press against Makoto's shoulder.

"What's going on?" Nagisa's voice calls from the far end of the corridor.

Haru gives Makoto an expectant look, and Makoto shakes his head very slightly. *Not yet.*

"Nothing, go back to class," Haru tells Nagisa. "Rei's giving us studying advice. For exams, you know."

"How boring," Nagisa says and walks off. Makoto catches Rei staring after him with a look of such longing that all his doubts about Rei's feelings vanish.

"So where did you get that book?" Haruka insists.

"Online," Rei mutters, somewhat reluctantly. "There's a place you can get all sorts of things. Like books. I'll text it to you."

Haru nods. "We'd better go or we'll be late," he says to Makoto.

Rei coughs. "Senpai, ah. This is very forward, but I'd like to know -- is there a reason you're keeping things a secret from Nagisa-kun?"

It's a fair question. They both have known Nagisa longer than they've known Rei. Makoto thinks back to the way Nagisa characterised two men on a date as 'weird'. Was that the reason he wants to wait?

No. Nagisa may not be the most sensitive person in the world but he is a good friend. He doesn't want Nagisa to know because he doesn't want Nagisa to jump to the wrong conclusion about Rei. Rei has always idolised Haru, and if he confesses to Nagisa any time soon after Makoto and Haru announce that they're a couple, Nagisa might think Rei's just trying to imitate Haru. But he can't say this to Rei.

"No real reason," he says. "He just turned up so unexpectedly."

*

Makoto stands outside the school gate and wonders what on earth is taking everyone so long. At lunch, they decided to go to the ramen shop in town for Nagisa's grand Mollify Rei Project, though of course Rei doesn't know that's the goal. It's like a double date, except Nagisa doesn't know it.

Makoto and Haru are the ones with all the information, which is a bit ridiculous since they can't even quite figure out what's going on with the two of them. Class time was fine, more or less, but Makoto spent most of their walk to school psyching himself up to take Haru's hand, only to have Haru grab his hand with an almost frustrated noise once their shoulders bumped for the umpteenth time.

By then they were already turning onto this street, and so their hands were linked only for a couple of steps until they spied an Iwatobi High uniform across the way. He wonders if he's going to be so timid when they're walking back from the ramen shop. And is it really okay for them to walk around holding hands? Iwatobi isn't some little village still clinging to the Meiji era, but it's far from Amsterdam in every way.

"Ah, Mako-chan, sorry for the wait," Nagisa breaks into his thoughts. "Where's Haru-chan?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Makoto says, nodding a greeting to a peaky-looking Rei. Haru wandered off after they got separated in the crowd of homeward-bound students, but Makoto figured he'd be here soon enough.

As if on cue, his phone rings. "Hello?"

"Yeah, sorry, I went home first. Don't say anything, just listen." Haru sounds out of breath -- did he run all the way back home just to make this phone call? He doesn't carry his cell around, and the call display showed Haru's landline, anyway.

However, as instructed, Makoto says nothing.

"Okay, so I'm calling to give you an excuse to leave so they can go by themselves. Tell them Rin's challenged me to a race and I asked you to come and time us or something."

"Are you sure that will work?" Makoto asks, turning away from Rei and Nagisa, who are giving him identical curious looks. He can't exactly say that if he tells these two that Haru's about to swim a race against Rin, both will want to come along and watch too. But he's sure Haru can figure it out.

"Oh, right. They're going to want to watch the race, won't they? Okay, then pretend I'm your mom and you have to hurry home to help me do something. I mean help her do something. I am not your mom."

Makoto suppresses a snicker. "Okay, *mom*. But what about you?"

"I'll think of something and call Nagisa myself."

"Okay, then. Bye," Makoto says, but Haru's already hung up.

"Yeah, that was my mom," Makoto says. He doesn't like lying, but he doesn't mind to if it's for a good cause. "I'm going to have to go home."

"Has something happened?" Rei asks, looking a little worried.

"No, no, it's nothing serious. She just needs my help with some stuff. You guys have fun!"

"See you, Mako-chan," Nagisa says. Makoto has an idea that Nagisa is far from heartbroken that there's one less wheel in this particular cart.

As he walks off, Makoto hears him start haranguing Rei into making their way to the ramen shop and letting Haru catch up later.

Oh well, at least I can stop worrying about the hand-holding thing for today.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

> In which Makoto gains an insight into how memories are made, and everyone understands that living in a smaller town can be tough on privacy sometimes.

Makoto hesitates at the foot of the steps to his house: he should really find out what Haru ended up telling Nagisa. Just so they can keep their story straight in case Rei asks tomorrow.

Why am I trying to find a reason to see him? Isn't wanting to reason enough?

All day at school, Makoto kept spacing out and thinking about getting Haru all alone, but it was the first day, and though it's not a new year, just a new semester, somehow people tended to wander to places they wouldn't normally go, or linger there. The school felt overpopulated even compared to Tokyo rush hour. The only time Makoto remembers being by himself was when he excused himself to go to the bathroom in geography. And even then a couple of other boys walked in while he washed his hands.

Makoto slides his thumbs underneath the straps of his backpack, adjusts it, and climbs the stairs to Haru's house. He already called his mom and told her he'd be going out after school, anyway. And he doesn't need a special reason to see the only person he really wants to see right now.

Haru opens the door before Makoto can even ring the doorbell.

"I was just on my way to the pool," Haru explains, letting Makoto inside. He's got one shoe on his foot, the other in his hand. "Saw you out there."

Makoto suddenly wonders if Haru was really looking out for Rei and Nagisa or if he just wanted to swim in peace, without Nagisa yelling instructions at him.

"If you carried your phone with you, you could've just made the call from school," Makoto says with a grin. "What did you tell Nagisa?"

"I just told him to tell Rei that I'm not going if you aren't," Haru says, shrugging. "Nagisa didn't want us there anyway. So we just had to make it look good so Rei would get off his case about being rude."

"I doubt Rei would mind either way," Makoto says, thinking of Rei staring after Nagisa when they met in the school corridor. "I was surprised he didn't jump at the chance to go out just with Nagisa."

"Maybe he's secretly shy," Haru suggests. "So are you coming with me or what?"

"Where are we going?" Makoto asks, following him out, since there's really not much else he can do when Haru is already walking out the door.

"The pool," Haru replies. He stops a little up the path and turns to face Makoto.

Makoto has become so used to the pool being Haru's escape that it didn't even occur to him that Haru might want him to come along. "I--" he's about to say that he doesn't have his gear, but it's right there in his locker at school. "Okay, yes, I'm going."

"Why'd you hesitate?" Haru asks as they walk down the stairs and head for the old docks. "If you have stuff to do, you don't have to come just because I want you to."

"No, it's not that," Makoto says, staring out ahead at the sea. "I was just surprised you want me to come with you."

Haru doesn't respond, and they walk down the slope to the dockside in silence. Makoto can't tell what Haru is thinking, because since a while ago, he hasn't been looking at Haru's face, but at Haru's hand hanging by his side and swaying a little as he walks.

"I want to swim with you," Haru says as they start to make their way across the dockside.

Makoto grabs Haru's hand, squeezes it, and doesn't let go. He didn't know what he was expecting -- whispers, stares; beginning as soon as their hands joined. But nobody's paying them any attention. Why would they? They're just a couple of local boys who have walked up and down this way for many years. They might as well be part of the scenery.

Haru bumps Makoto's upper arm with his shoulder and turns his head to look out at the sea.

Makoto follows his gaze. Haru's hand is soft and warm, and walking like this feels like they're even more *together* than before. It might just be his imagination, but the ocean air smells crisper and the sun shines merrier, and the breeze that ruffles Haru's hair and dances across Makoto's face feels gentler. They've taken this way to school together hundreds of times, but this is the one he will remember. A long time from now, when he's an old man, he'll reminisce about his youth, and this will be one of the moments that light up the brightest.

Haru peers into his face, and Makoto realises he was getting a little misty-eyed. *Jeez, I'm not an old man yet.* "I was just thinking that I really love being here with you," he says.

"Don't say stuff like that where everyone can hear you," Haru mutters, and holds on tighter to Makoto's hand. "Stupid."

*

"You need to build your stamina back up," Haru says as they finish changing back into their street clothes after swimming for an hour. "The coach is gonna nag you when he sees you swim tomorrow."

"I know," Makoto says, flinging his swimming trunks over the clothesline Kou procured from somewhere. Six weeks doesn't seem like a lot of time, but it's enough to start losing muscle

mass, especially since his diet in Tokyo wasn't exactly balanced or protein-rich. He tried his best, but he's not much of a cook, and he only had so much time to himself.

"What did you eat while you were in Tokyo?" Haru asks. The way he says *Tokyo* makes it sound like some kind of a dirty word; his eyes narrow a little and his voice gets lower.

"Is -- ah. Is there something wrong?" Makoto asks, turning his head to look at him. "You sound like Tokyo offended you."

"It did," Haru replies, shutting his locker and levelling him with a stare. "We could've had the whole summer."

Makoto approaches him. "It's not Tokyo's fault that we were misunderstanding each other."

"Are you saying you want to go back there after all?"

"I'm not going anywhere without you," Makoto replies and puts a hand on Haru's shoulder.

Haru closes the distance between them so fast and kisses him so fiercely that Makoto backs up a step. Haru grabs his tie with one hand, moves his other arm under Makoto's shirt, and continues to push him until Makoto's back hits the changing room door. They're both panting as if they've just swum a race, and Makoto sincerely regrets his clothing. Not its style, but its existence.

Haru lets go of his tie, takes Makoto's hand and laces his fingers through Makoto's. His other hand rests splayed against Makoto's mid-back. Makoto bends to kiss him again, and Haru leans into him the same way he did the first time they did this, like flood tide and the sunrise, relentless, indomitable.

"Haru," Makoto breathes. "What if a teacher comes to check if the door's locked?"

"We're right against the door. We'll hear them," Haru says.

"What if we don't, and they lock us in here?" Makoto asks. He's a bit shocked that he isn't just completely opposed to doing this at school. He kind of really likes the idea, even. As long as they don't get caught.

Haru sighs against his neck. "Fine, let's go back to my house."

As they're crossing the schoolyard to the gates, Haru stops suddenly. "Personal lubricant," he announces, giving Makoto an impassive stare.

"Y-yes?" Makoto nearly whimpers, peering around to see if anyone's around. "Please keep your voice down, Haru-chan."

"Have you used such a thing before? When you, you know." Haru makes a suggestive motion with his hand, and Makoto wishes for inner strength.

"I-- no?" Makoto's tried using hand lotion before, but he just stole some of his mother's, and it made his private area smell so much like fake coconuts that he had to take a second shower.

It didn't feel that much better, anyway. "What's with such a question all of a sudden?"

"I just remembered reading about it in Rei's book. Apparently it's supposed to make everything feel better."

"I thought that was for, um." Makoto blushes. "P-p-penetration."

"Like when you put it in the ass? I didn't get that far yet."

"I-I see," Makoto says, looking at Haru's face with some trepidation. "Well, um, I'm glad? I didn't even know you could get that far all by yourself." *And with what? A banana would be way too soft--*

Haru's face turns crimson. "In the book, I mean! I'm not that far in the book."

"Oh!"

"I told you, I haven't really thought much about stuff like this."

Makoto just wants to pull him close and hide both of them away from the world for a while, but they're halfway to the school gates, and club activities are starting to wrap up: louder, school's-out voices are starting to come down through the open windows.

"So d-do you, er. Want to buy some?" Haru asks. "Lubricant. Before we go home. Since we're in town already."

"Okay," Makoto says. "But don't we need the adult shop?" Even though they're old enough to buy adult materials, Makoto's in his school uniform, and it's most likely against some school rule or another to go into adult shops. Haru isn't in uniform, but Makoto isn't going to let him go to such a place alone.

"The drugstore sells it," Haru replies. "I've seen it before."

"Drugstore it is," Makoto says, relieved.

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The two of them spend a long time wandering up and down the drugstore aisles, since they have no clue what they're looking for, and it's not like they can just ask an employee; it's too embarrassing.

Finally, after Makoto trudges past a shelf with feminine hygiene items for the fourth time, he spots a smaller display right next to it, with several dozen different sorts of condoms and tall bottles of what has to be personal lubricant.

"Haru-chan," Makoto hisses and waves him over. "Is this it?" he asks.

"No, those are the things women use for their periods."

"I know that!" Makoto says, scandalised, and pointing again, this time actually hitting the hard plastic box closest to him. "I mean this." Inside is an inconspicuous-looking rectangular grey bottle.

Haru picks it up and inspects it. "Yeah." He glances at the stacks of condoms. "Do we need these?"

"I-- ah, I guess so," Makoto says. *Just how far does he plan to go today?* "I mean, we can't get pregnant, but it's probably a good idea anyhow."

Haru nods and begins studying the boxes. "Oh, extra large, we should get these for you."

Makoto's face burns so fiercely he ducks down to avoid lighting up the whole store. "Don't just say stuff like that!"

Haru stands on his tiptoes and peers over the shelves, probably to reassure Makoto that no one is nearby, but his expression quickly changes from mild amusement to concern. "Wait, isn't that Togawa at the cash register?"

Makoto straightens back up and turns casually to look. Sure enough, it's a girl from their class who knows their names and faces. How are they supposed to make her ring up condoms and lube?

"Let's go to that new shopping centre tomorrow after school," Haru says, tugging on Makoto's sleeve. "The one across town."

"We have club practice tomorrow."

"So we'll go after that. Nobody there knows us, so it'll be fine."

Makoto nods, a little deflated. "Okay."

As they exit the drugstore empty-handed, they walk right into Nagisa, who seems to be hurrying out of the shopping arcade.

"Nagisa?" Makoto calls, not even sure if he's got the right person. This person looks like Nagisa, and he's even wearing the Iwatobi uniform, but Makoto's never seen Nagisa look this serious.

Nagisa stops in his tracks and turns to face them. "Crap. I mean. Hi."

"We were just looking for you," Haruka says, elbowing Makoto, who smiles automatically. *We were?*

Nagisa glances behind them. "You were looking for me in a drugstore?"

"Oh, no," Makoto says. "That was something. For my mom. I had to buy a... thing. They didn't have any. Things. I mean--"

"Where's Rei?" Haru asks, cutting off Makoto's hopeless flailing.

Nagisa's face goes promptly back to the serious look. "I dunno, I guess he's still at the restaurant."

"What happened?" Makoto asks, heart plummeting.

"Wasn't it your treat?" Haru asks.

Nagisa waves both hands at them. "It was! I mean it is! It's one of those places where they make you pay up front."

"So why did you leave Rei alone?" Haru demands.

"First you have to promise that you won't shout at me," Nagisa says, peering up at Makoto.

"Why are you looking at Makoto? He's never shouted at anyone in his life."

"Sorry," Nagisa offers. Makoto smiles and makes a placating gesture.

"I won't shout," Haru promises. "So out with it."

[tbc]

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> In which Nagisa turns out to be even sneakier than expected, Ren gets a taste of democracy, and Makoto and Haru just can't catch a break.

Nagisa sniffs. "You didn't say you promise."

"Promise what?" Haru asks.

"Not to shout," Nagisa says. "You didn't say promise."

Makoto and Haru both sigh and then exchange embarrassed glances.

"I promise," Haru says, with a look that suggests that instead of shouting, he's going to pick Nagisa up by the scruff of his neck and carry him to the nearest corner to reflect on his actions a bit.

"Well, do you remember when I came by the other day?"

"When you interrup-- uh, I mean, I remember." Haru turns to Makoto. "Saturday. Right?"

"Yes," Makoto says and looks up at the clouds above the glass-tiled roof. He has just remembered what Nagisa interrupted that day and his uniform shirt's a little stifling all of a sudden.

"I kind of wasn't totally honest when I said I thoughtRei-chan hates me."

"He doesn't hate you," Makoto points out, just to say something.

"I know-- well, he does now. I mean." Nagisa takes a deep breath. "The-truth-is-I-fell-for-Rei-chan-and-I-made-up-the-whole-he-hates-me-thing-so-I-could-talk-to-you-about-it-without-weirding-you-out."

"Was that even Japanese?" Haru asks Makoto, who's grinning now, unable to help himself. So Rei had nothing to worry about after all.

A guy taking another guy out for yakiniku for no good reason is weird.

Nagisa wasn't saying that idly; he was fishing for a reaction. He was trying to find out if Haru and Makoto would disapprove of guys going on dates with guys.

"So what exactly happened?" Makoto asks Nagisa, who still seems a bit shocked that he's actually come out and said it.

"Don't tell me you tried to force your attentions on him," Haru says, fixing Nagisa with a beady-eyed stare.

"I wouldn't do that!" Nagisa protests. "Really, Haru-chan, what kind of person do you take me for? No, I didn't even get to confess properly or anything. We were just talking, and I said I wanted to go to the amusement park with Rei-chan once we finally start dating. It was an accident!"

Haru snickers.

"And?" Makoto prompts, wishing he could have been there. But of course, if Haru and Makoto had been there, it might not have happened.

"And Rei-chan got such a scary look on his face that I ran away," Nagisa concludes. "And here I am." He spreads his arms to the sides.

"A scary look?" Haru asks, sceptical. "Can Rei really make a scary face?"

"You didn't see it," Nagisa protests. "You weren't there. He got so mad his face went totally red."

"So you left your school bag with Rei," Haru points out.

"Oh," Nagisa says, his eyes going really wide after he gropes at his side. "You're right. My bag."

Makoto puts one arm around Nagisa's shoulders, the other around Haru's, and steers them both in the direction Nagisa came from. "Come on, let's go back to where Rei is."

"No, please don't make me," Nagisa whines, pretending to dig his heels into the ground like a reluctant horse, but walking along regardless. "If I'm going to be rejected, at least give me some time to prepare--"

"Don't just decide Rei's feelings for him," Haru says, glaring for some reason. Makoto follows his gaze and realises his arm is still around Nagisa's shoulders. He drops his hand to his side quickly, and Haru looks satisfied.

But it's only Nagisa, Makoto mouths.

Haru tilts his chin up and turns away, as if to say, *I don't care who it is, don't do that.*

"What are you two doing?" Nagisa asks. "Telepathy is rude, you know."

Haru stops. "Is this the restaurant?"

It has to be -- Rei is right there at a table next to the window with nothing but Nagisa's abandoned bowl for company. He doesn't seem to have noticed the three of them.

"Now I feel really bad," Nagisa says. "He's all by himself. Do you think he's angry?"

"He doesn't look angry to me," Makoto remarks.

Actually, Rei looks even more pleased with himself than he did when he came fifth in the 100m butterfly at last year's winter prefecturals. Just like then, he's trying to play it cool, but the smile hiding at the corners of his mouth is obvious even from this distance.

He looks just like Makoto has felt since Haru kissed him for the first time.

"We should go," Haru half-whispers, nodding at Nagisa, who's staring at Rei as if the rest of the world has faded to nothing.

Makoto lets Haru pull him away through the shopping arcade, past the drugstore, the 100-yen shop, the florist, and the game centre, back into the street.

"Do you think they're going to be okay?" Haru asks as they start towards home.

"I think so," Makoto replies. He starts to elaborate, but his phone rings. "Hello?"

"Mako-kun, are you busy right now?" his mom asks.

"Not really," Makoto says and immediately regrets it. They were headed back to Haru's house! "Well, a little."

"Oh, then never mind. I was going to ask you to come and mind the twins, but I can leave them alone for a couple of hours."

"What happened?" Makoto asks.

"Nothing, nothing -- they're having a neighbourhood watch meeting and don't have anyone to take notes because Fujiwara-san is sick again, so I volunteered."

Makoto frowns. Ren and Ran are old enough to be responsible for themselves, but he still feels uneasy about leaving them all alone. What if they open the door to a stranger? What if they crawl up to the attic and can't get down and one of them ends up falling? What if they get into Mom's makeup again?

"I'll come home," he says with an apologetic glance at Haru, who is walking beside him and pretending like he isn't listening.

"No, really, it's fine--"

"I'm already on my way," Makoto says firmly. He can hear how relieved she is even though she's telling him not to come, and that's all the reason he needs. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Okay. Supper's in the fridge if you guys get hungry before I come home. I won't be long."

"You have to go home," Haru says after Makoto hangs up.

Makoto looks at him, dejected. "Come over? We could... do homework."

Haru takes his hand and laces his fingers through Makoto's. "I'll try to contain my excitement."

*

Once the twins' homework is done , that means everyone's homework is done, because Ren and Ran make a lot of noise, and Makoto can't just leave them to go elsewhere.

"Do you two want supper or will you wait until Mom comes home?" Makoto asks, sticking his physics workbook back inside his bag.

"Mom," Ran says.

"Yeah," Ren echoes.

"Haru?" Makoto asks. "Are you hungry?"

Haru shakes his head. "I ate before."

"Let's watch a movie!" Ran shouts, planting herself in front of the television.

"That's too close, you'll ruin your eyes," Makoto says, ushering her away as he opens the video drawer under the TV. "Go sit on the sofa. What movie do you want to watch?"

"A scary one," Ren suggests. "Mom said we're not allowed to watch it by ourselves but since you and Haru are here, it's okay, right?"

Makoto doesn't like scary movies at all, so he hopes Ran has a counter-suggestion.

"No, let's watch the one about the little people," Ran says, as if on cue. "You're not supposed to watch scary movies on a *Monday*, stupid -- a ghost will come after you while you're in the bath!"

Makoto knows this isn't true and yet he also knows that he will never watch scary movies on Mondays just in case. Actually, he'll just never watch scary movies; problem solved.

"I vote for the little people too," he says. "Sorry Ren, you're outnumbered."

"Not fair! You didn't ask Haru's opinion," Ren points out, crawling over to Haru's side at the living room table. "You want the scary one, right?"

Haru flicks his forehead. "Nope. Little people."

"Aw, you guys are a bunch of fraidy cats," Ren declares. He joins his sister on the sofa, but sits on the very far end to protest his displeasure with the democratic process.

Makoto and Haru settle between them, and though they're not going to be able to get any closer than shoulder-to-shoulder, Makoto's still happy. As the kids become engrossed in the

movie -- despite Ren's protestations, this is one of his favourites too -- he does start to wonder what it would be like to watch a movie together with Haru, just the two of them. Like a date.

Which reminds him of Nagisa's inadvertent confession to Rei. *I hope they're able to work things out.*

"Why did you get mad when I had my arm around Nagisa?" Makoto asks Haru, quietly. "I would never... you know."

Haru glances at him. "Would you like it if I did something like that with Nagisa?"

"No," Makoto says immediately. "I really wouldn't want to see that."

Haru gives him a cross look. "Even though it's only Nagisa?"

Makoto rubs the back of his head. "Touché."

Ren climbs into Haru's lap and sticks his face into the space between their heads. "What are you whispering about?"

"Physics homework," Haru tells him. "Watch the movie."

*

The next day, Makoto and Haru's class has a committee meeting during lunch, so they don't end up seeing Rei and Nagisa until club practice.

Nothing at all seems different, though. Nagisa is his usual cheerful self and Rei's as focussed on improving his time as ever, and when they speak to each other, it is as though nothing has changed between them. Although he knows it's not his business, Makoto practically burns with curiosity. Haru, for his part, is only interested in the water; it's useless trying to engage him in conversation.

But no, something *has* changed, he realises as he watches Rei traverse the pool. To Makoto, this is the usual, but he's been gone from the club for six weeks. The last time they were all here together, on Saturday, it wasn't really a practice; they were just catching up. So whatever happened yesterday was enough to make Rei stop avoiding Nagisa.

Still, he wants to ask Rei about it, but doesn't get a chance. Once practice is over, Haru practically drags him out of the changing room and to get their street shoes.

"What's the rush? Where are we going?" Makoto asks as they exit through the school gates.

"The shopping centre," Haru says. "Did you forget?"

Makoto did forget. Yesterday, Haru fell asleep with his head on Makoto's shoulder, and that has filled his head with all sorts of thoughts about sleeping with Haru, wishing Haru would fall asleep on him more often, wishing he could have woken Haru up with something other than a shoulder-shake and a *Haru-chan, my mom's home*.

"So does this count as a date?" Makoto asks once they're on the train.

"Probably not," Haru says after considering it for a few moments. "We're just going to the drugstore."

"Let's go on a real date next time," Makoto suggests.

Haru offers a small grin. "Like to the amusement park?"

"Or the movies. Or we could go to that big aquarium they were advertising on TV yesterday."

Haru's eyes light up, and Makoto can't help but smile at him.

Their stop's just a short walk away from the new shopping centre -- a monolithic glass-and-concrete edifice that's like something out of a futuristic sci-fi manga. It's so different from the shopping arcade Makoto's been going to all his life that he feels a little intimidated. The local neighbourhood associations protested this place being built, saying that it would ruin the atmosphere, and now that he is looking at it, he kind of sees their point. It gives the impression of an alien mothership, rows of circular windows like so many bugged-out eyes.

Makoto looks over at Haru, who's studying the building with a critic's eye. "It's ugly," Haru declares. "Let's go inside."

The inside gives a much nicer impression, though Makoto feels terribly out of place amid the harsh overhead fluorescence, gleaming tile-floors, and the most elaborate shop window displays he's ever seen. The air smells vaguely citrusy.

"Makoto? Haru?"

Makoto straightens his back really quickly, arms at his sides. He knows that voice.

"*Nobody there knows us,* you said. *It'll be fine,* you said," he mutters to Haru, who's suddenly showing avid interest in a nearby poster advertising the Japan Self-Defense Forces.

"What are you two doing here?"

"Hey, Rin," Makoto says, defeated. "We're… shopping."

[tbc]

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> In which Rin has strange priorities, Haru seizes the day, and Makoto receives an unexpected assist from a cat.

"No, we aren't," Haru says, turning his attention away from the recruitment poster and to Rin, who's also still in his uniform. Haru takes Makoto's hand but because he's obviously as flustered as Makoto, he ends up grabbing just Makoto's fingers and squeezing them tight enough to hurt a little. "We're on a date."

"Oh, I see," Rin says. "Sorry for distur--- I mean, huh?" His mouth stays open as he looks from Haru to Makoto with the face of a man trying to dispel a hallucination..

Makoto sighs and presses the hand that Haru isn't holding to his forehead. "Don't just spring it on people, Haru-chan."

Haru shrugs. "It shouldn't be a big deal to anyone except us, unless it's some meddling busybody."

"I'm not a busybody," Rin complains. "You just surprised me," he adds before Makoto can protest that Haru didn't mean to call Rin that. "Anyway, I'm actually glad. Two fewer guys to watch around my sister."

"*That's* your priority?" Makoto blurts. His face feels warm. Of course he'd never expect Rin to say something like he's happy for the two of them -- how could Rin do that? He likes Haru.

Does he? Makoto has always assumed that Rin liked Haru, but then again, he also assumed that Haru liked Rin, and he doesn't have the slightest doubt that he was wrong about *that*. In any event, Rin does look a bit flustered, but the news is obviously not heartbreaking. Rin doesn't exactly have a talent for hiding his feelings; he just expresses most of them through getting angry first, asking questions later. And he doesn't look angry to Makoto.

One look at Haru's satisfied expression explains to Makoto why Haru, who a couple of days ago agreed that they shouldn't go around telling people just yet, chose to to tell Rin now. He wanted Makoto to be sure. Makoto hasn't spared Rin much thought since he first let himself believe in Haru's feelings. It would have made him feel too guilty to be so happy at the expense of a friend's feelings, so he pushed it out of his mind until he was ready to deal with it. Now it looks like he doesn't need to deal with it at all.

Rin's been saying something since a while ago, but Makoto hasn't heard a word, so he just smiles and hopes Haru *is* listening.

"You can't control who your sister goes out with," Haru says. "Just give it up."

Rin scoffs. "I'm not trying to control anything. I just don't want some douchebag to take advantage of her."

Take advantage? Of Kou-chan? Makoto thinks, peering at Rin.

"Have you *met* your sister?" Haru asks.

"Just because she's outgoing doesn't mean she isn't delicate," Rin insists. "Besides, she's too young to start dating. An innocent girl like her."

Makoto thinks about Kou's extremely frank appraisals of just about every unclothed male body she's encountered since he's known her, and decides that now is really not the time or the place to disabuse Rin of his somewhat… inaccurate notions regarding his little sister.

"Well, we should get going," he says, freeing his fingers from Haru's somewhat sweaty grasp and taking his hand properly. It feels really nice to do this in front of someone who knows them. It makes everything a little more real.

"The cinema complex is the other way," Rin says, pointing in the opposite direction to where Makoto was turning.

"Cinema?" Makoto asks.

Rin frowns. "Why did you come here on a date if not to see a movie? This place sucks otherwise."

Haru interjects. "Yes, we're going to the movies. Come on, Makoto."

"Don't forget about the meet next weekend!" Rin shouts after them.

"We'll be there! Bye!" Makoto calls, letting Haru drag him away. He's very aware of a few curious heads turning to stare at them, and the feeling is really different from how it was with just Rin. The narrowed eyes of one middle-aged lady remind him that some people will think it's awful that Haru and Makoto are together.

But the lady's cold, sharp eyes are gone in the next instant, left behind. All Makoto knows is that Haru is next to him, and Haru's hand is warm.

He looks back, but can't see Rin in the crowd any more. "We can go back now, Haru -- Rin's gone."

"Since I already told Rin we were on a date, let's be on a date," Haru says as they arrive in front of the cinema ticket booths.

Makoto smiles. This area of the shopping centre smells much friendlier -- there's food on sale beyond the ticket booths. "Okay," he says. "Just let me text my mom that we're going to see a movie." He releases Haru's hand and takes out his phone. "You want to see one, right?" he asks, composing the message.

"What?"

"A movie."

Haru studies the overhead display that shows what's playing on which screen. "I guess," he says, with a look of mild surprise. "What about that one?" He points to a dark blue poster of a bespectacled character in some kind of military uniform, smiling enigmatically against a cool urban backdrop.

Makoto shakes his head as he puts his phone away. "I can't remember the last time I've seen something with actual people in it. Could we see a regular movie?"

Haru turns to stare at the newest Godzilla poster.

"Too scary," Makoto says quickly.

"Godzilla isn't scary," Haru says with a sigh. "Okay, the racing one starts in ten minutes, how about it?"

Makoto has a feeling that if he rejects this one, Haru will lose his patience and they're going to end up not going to see anything at all, and he's really looking forward to it even though it was a spur-of-the-moment thing. "Okay, let's see that one. It's dubbed into Japanese, even."

The movie turns out to be less about racing and more about some criminal gang getting revenge on another gang for killing their friend, though the story is incidental to the elaborately orchestrated car chases. As usual, they run out of snacks a quarter of the way through the movie.

After the fifth time Makoto cringes away from a very shiny foreign-made grille careening towards the audience, Haru puts his arm around his shoulders and pulls him in. "What are you getting scared for?" he whispers.

Makoto sticks his face into the juncture of Haru's neck and shoulder, shuts his eyes, and doesn't reply. He can still hear what's going on, and Haru is a lot more interesting than a bunch of crazy Americans trying to commit vehicular manslaughter. He breathes in deeply, letting the smell of Haru -- a clean scent, a little of the soap they use at the school showers and a little of Haru's house -- fill his head. He wants to press his lips to Haru's skin, but although it's dark in the theatre, he's sure that if he moves around, someone behind them is bound to notice that it's not just a case of a high schooler falling asleep on his friend's shoulder in the middle of a movie.

He sneaks his hand under the armrest and curls it around Haru's hands, folded in his lap. Haru shifts closer and takes Makoto's hand between his palms. Makoto feels so warm that he *could* fall asleep despite all the shouting and metal-screeching from the sound system. But then the movie finishes and the two of them have to disentangle their hands and pull apart before the lights come back on.

"I never imagined you'd get scared by car chases," Haru scolds him on the way back to the train station.

Makoto grins sheepishly. "It wasn't that bad. But cars are too unpredictable, so they're kind of scary."

"It's all about the driver," Haru says. Their timing is lucky; an Iwatobi train is pulling into the station just as they reach the top of the stairs.

"If it were up to me, I'd make sure there's always a train to take people where they need to go," Makoto says once they've sat down. "Trains may be slower but they're safer."

Haru stares out the window across from them, at the platform signs and vending machines whooshing by. "What about going to the farmer's market?"

"We only need a car because there isn't a train station close enough. If they built one, then we'd take the train."

Haru considers this. "But if you have little kids, isn't it better to use a car so they don't make a racket on the train?"

Outside, the trappings of small-town suburbia give way to rice fields. "Just teach the children not to make a racket," Makoto replies. "Even the twins mind their manners when we take them on train trips."

"What about when they were babies? Babies don't even know what manners are."

Makoto frowns. "That's true. And some people get upset about baby strollers on the train, even though they're not against the rules."

The train leaves the rice fields and flower meadows behind as it arrives in Iwatobi proper. The two of them are halfway to the station stairs when Haru stops abruptly. It's well into the late evening rush, and several people *tsk* as they're forced to careen around him.

"What's wrong, Haru-chan?" Makoto asks, tugging him out of the way.

Haru gives him a look that's half mirth, half dismay. "We forgot about the drug store."

Makoto blinks, remembers why they went on this train trip in the first place, and laughs. "We totally did."

Haru grins slightly and resumes walking to the stairs. "Let's just get that stuff online."

"Online?" Makoto asks, following. "How can we do that without credit cards?"

"That's true," Haru says as they exit the station and set off towards the dockside. He's silent most of the way home, staring first at the sea and then at the ground beneath his feet. Makoto can see that he's deep in thought and lets him be.

We just went on our first date, he realises when they're halfway home. In a way, it doesn't really feel any different from any other time they went to the cinema, though they usually went to the one in town. It's a bit shabbier and it rarely has any big blockbuster titles on offer, but Makoto has always loved it best until today.

Today, he got to snuggle close to Haru and hold his hand in a dark movie theatre, like they were a real couple. Which is kind of a strange thing to think. But do real couples do sexual things before they even go on their first date? Makoto doesn't think so, which is why having been on a date kind of makes him feel better about-- well, about everything. After all, Haru's declaration, to Rin, that they were on a date was the first time either one of them even acknowledged that they were *dating*.

They reach Makoto's house. Makoto really doesn't want to part ways yet, but he knows he should go home. There's homework, and he has to do more research for university application requirements -- if his dad comes home, Makoto won't get to use the computer.

Haru stops. "Makoto."

"Yes?" Makoto asks, a bit timidly. He's been so focused on his own thoughts that he's not sure what to make of Haru's serious tone.

Haru looks into his eyes. "You know Rei's book? He got that online, didn't he?"

"Y-Yes?" Rei did promise to send Haru the address, too.

"So they must do cash on delivery," Haru says. "Rei wouldn't have a credit card any more than we would."

"Oh," Makoto says. "Yes, that would make sense, wouldn't it?" *Is Haru that serious about getting all that sex stuff?* "But when would we get… stuff… delivered? We've got school most of the day."

"I'll just skip the day it's supposed to be delivered," Haru says with a one-armed shrug.

"Don't skip school for something like that!" Makoto says, blushing for some reason. It's probably the idea of Haru taking delivery of heaven knows what. Condoms? Lubricant? More books? Some weird toys? Makoto doesn't want to think about it, but his imagination is going its own way, since he was just thinking about how much he wanted to kiss Haru's neck earlier.

"It's decided," Haru says. "There's no point going back there if we can just get it delivered. Let's go."

"Where are we going?" Makoto asks, trailing after him.

Haru stops and turns around. "My house. You don't want to?"

Makoto glances back at his kitchen window. From down here he can only see the top of the frame behind the property fence, but the lights are on, and in the gathering dusk, it is as though the window frame emits a steady glow of its own. Usually, just seeing this would make him want to join his family inside. But now he is already at the warmest place in the world for him: right next to Haru.

"I want to," he says. "But it's getting kind of late, and I haven't been home all day." He gives the kitchen window a second, guiltier, glance.

"It's okay," Haru says. "It's fine if you go home."

But Makoto can clearly see that it's most definitely *not* fine -- at least not completely. Haru truly doesn't mind if Makoto goes home, but he wants something, and Makoto can't figure out what it is. *Think, think.*

Mackerel Five trots down the stairway and vanishes into a bush, paying them no mind. Makoto remembers Haru in his backyard on Sunday night, when they fed the cats. *Goodnight kiss.*

Makoto glances around and reaches out to take Haru's hand, then pulls him as close to the stone wall under his house as possible, away from the street lamp overhead. There's no one out here, but if someone were to appear, they'd see a large shadow where Haru and Makoto stand now.

"Last time we had a goodnight kiss you did some really unfair things," he whispers, resting his hands on the sides of Haru's upper arms.

Haru tugs on Makoto's tie and puts his other hand on the back of Makoto's neck, his fingertips brushing softly against Makoto's hair. "You didn't kiss me goodnight yesterday."

Makoto kisses the corner of Haru's mouth. "I'll kiss you twice, then." He moves his arms down and twines them around Haru's waist, pulling him in for a second kiss, a sloppier one right on the lips, and then a third kiss, deeper, deep enough to remember the taste of the pretzely things they bought at the movies.

Haru pulls back, breathing hard. "Now who's unfair?" He puts both arms around Makoto's neck and holds him tightly, his head turned to the side, nose against Makoto's collarbone.

Somewhere deep in his mind, Makoto knows this is completely reckless -- his father might appear at the end of the street at any moment, and he wouldn't mistake the two of them for a shadow; he knows what the shadows here look like. His mother might come down to knock on neighbouring Nakatani-san's door and offer some of the cookies she said she was going to bake that morning.

But the prospect of getting caught by his parents isn't even the problem. What scares him the most is that he doesn't care if they do get caught. Haru lifts his head to kiss him, quick and neat -- a good-bye kiss, and Makoto bends his neck to hide his face in the space between Haru's neck and shoulder, and this time he does let his lips touch Haru's skin.

"I'm going," Haru says, extricating himself. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Makoto's thunderstruck by the loss he feels as Haru takes one last look behind him and begins to climb the stairs to the shrine. All of a sudden he can't think of a single reason not to follow.

[tbc]

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In which there is no such thing as a gay uniform.

Just to be sure, Makoto waits until he can no longer see Haru. If the desire to follow passes as soon as Haru is out of sight, then he won't go. He doesn't want to act out of a half-hearted, spur-of-the-moment impulse. Haru is too important to him. This new kind of warmth in his chest -- brighter than sunshine and much too big for Makoto to contain -- is too important to him.

But even when Haru takes the turn at the top of the stairs and disappears from sight, all Makoto can feel is his absence. He's not ready to part from Haru yet. He knows that if he goes to Haru's house the parting will become even more difficult, but even so he's sprinting up the steps, nearly tripping near the top, and gasping Haru's name into the gathering shadows.

Haru, who's halfway to his door, turns and waits very calmly for Makoto to reach him.

Makoto stops in front of him, bends down to put his hands just above his knees -- his thigh muscles are not pleased with the rapidfire climb up the steps; he really needs to get back in shape -- and looks up at Haru. "I want to be with you a little longer. Is… is that okay?"

He can't be sure, but he'd swear Haru's suppressing a smile. "Say that in the first place," Haru says, turning aside. "Let's go inside."

Once they're in the house, Makoto's barely had time to step up after removing his shoes when Haru grabs him by the front of his shirt and pushes him against the wall; Makoto's backpack, which he hasn't had a chance to remove, narrowly misses the painting hanging there. It's as though Haru's picked right up from when they were in the changing room yesterday -- they *were* going to come back here but got sidetracked by the first failed drugstore trip and then by Nagisa.

Haru stares up into Makoto's eyes, and Makoto guesses he's trying to confirm that they both remember why they were headed here yesterday afternoon. Makoto nods, and as Haru leans up to kiss him, he slides his hands underneath Haru's shirt. Haru's skin is so soft beneath his fingertips he wonders what it would feel like against his lips. He thinks about all the places on Haru's body that he hasn't kissed yet, and his hold on Haru's sides tightens as he shifts to place kisses against Haru's jawline, the side of his neck, his collarbone.

He wants the shirt gone so he can see more, reach more, so he can lay Haru down on the floor and find new and interesting places to kiss, and he realises his fingers are pressing a bit too

hard against Haru's ribcage. Makoto slackens his grip, laying an apologetic kiss against Haru's temple. "Sorry, I got a little--"

"You can be a little rough," Haru murmurs, loosening his tie and removing it over his head. "I don't break easily."

They look into each other's eyes, and Makoto understands that Haru wants what he wants; he just lacks the words to ask for it. Just the same as Makoto. It's not even that he wants to be rough; he just wants Haru close to him, closer, *now*, and his fingers go to work on Haru's shirt buttons, smoothly, from the top down, as Haru goes from the bottom up. Their hands collide halfway, and Makoto gives a shaky laugh as Haru straightens up to tug the shirt off.

Makoto places a hesitant hand against Haru's chest, just above his heart, and feels it beating -- a steady, rapid pace, not quite in time with Makoto's but close enough. Haru leans in closer, trapping Makoto's hand between them, smooths both hands down Makoto's hips, slides them back to rest on Makoto's ass.

Makoto looks down at the well-defined expanse of Haru's back. He's seen it a million times before, but never from this angle. They're swimmers -- their bodies are often in full public view, so he can't be trying to monopolise the sight of Haru's half-naked body. But he feels like this is his alone: perfect smooth skin he can kiss if he wants, though he'd have to turn Haru around first.

His cheeks flame when he thinks about what Haru would look like stretched out on the floor so Makoto can kneel over him and kiss between his shoulder blades -- just a soft, light kiss he can think about later when all the first-years show up to ogle them at practice. Their bodies are often on display, which means they can't carelessly leave marks on each other, but an invisible mark is fine.

Talking of marks, trying to go much further here near the entrance might lead to floor bruises, and Makoto's pretty sure he won't be able to remain standing the whole time. His knees are weak from just feeling Haru's bare chest through his shirt; he might collapse completely if his own shirt comes off. Which, judging from the way Haru is starting to tug on said shirt, is a near certainty.

"If we stay here, the floor is a little--" he begins, but Haru pulls back and nods before he can continue.

"Let's go upstairs." Haru picks his shirt up from the floor, slings it over his shoulder, then takes Makoto's hand and leads him up the steps. Makoto blushes even more fiercely as he remembers making this same trip while thinking they were going to go to sleep.

Makoto's backpack is still on his shoulders, and he shrugs it off and puts it down at the foot of the bed. He sits down on the bed and pulls Haru to himself, getting to work on his belt.

"Hurry," Haru tells him, and Makoto pauses to look up at him.

"Haru-chan, I know you can remove your clothes with lightning speed, but I want to take my time," he admits. "It's the first time I undress you like this, so, you know." He gazes up at

Haru, almost sure that Haru will know what he means.

"Do you think we've been taking things too fast?" Haru asks with a slight frown. *He knows exactly what I mean.*

"A little?" Makoto says. "I don't mind," he adds very quickly, noticing Haru's eyes begin to widen. "You make me really happy."

Haru blushes. "Just don't take too long," he mutters, nodding down at his belt buckle.

Makoto undoes it, then the top button on Haru's uniform trousers, then the zipper, moving with care rather than deliberate slowness, trying to memorise every little thing: the smooth, dark, familiar sight of Haru's swimming gear through the gap in the trousers; cicadas chirruping outside the window; thick, scratchy wool parting beneath his fingers; the scent of Haru's favourite fabric softener wafting from the bedding; the empty space in his mouth waiting for Haru's tongue.

He pushes the trousers down, and they fall to the floor with a rustle like a whispered promise. As Makoto slides his fingertips under the thick polyester and starts to peel Haru's jammer away, Haru lifts his chin up with one hand. "Don't look."

"Okay," Makoto agrees, gazing up at Haru's flushed face, half wishing to hurry so he can kiss that mouth. He has to use a little more force to get the jammer all the way down Haru's thighs until it, too, falls down. "Can I look now?"

"Not while you're dressed," Haru mutters, pulling Makoto up from the bed, shoving his tie out of the way, fumbling with his shirt buttons.

Makoto lets Haru take care of the tie and shirt and undoes his own belt as quickly as he can, wiggling out of his trousers as best he can while trying earnestly not to stare at Haru. Haru flings Makoto's shirt open just as Makoto manages to get his boxers down.

He pulls Haru to himself and gets a full-body shiver as Haru's dick bumps against his thigh. Haru pulls his shirt down at the cuffs and lets it drop to the floor with the rest of their stuff. Makoto keeps tugging Haru back until the backs of his legs hit the bed and he pulls Haru down with him; they end up diagonal on the bed with Haru partially on top. Makoto puts his arms around Haru and takes the kiss he's craved.

They kiss for a long time, shifting against each other, both of them hesitant at the start -- this feels much more real with no clothes in the way. Makoto murmurs Haru's name between kisses a few times -- his full name, *Haruka*, the name he loves best -- and each time Haru presses closer to him. Makoto reckons he's found a way to call Haru's name that Haru doesn't dislike.

Haru puts his arms around Makoto's neck and pulls him a bit to the side, wraps one leg around Makoto's hip, and Makoto kneads his ass with both hands, kissing the side of his face, the soft place beneath his ear, his Adam's apple, his collarbone, his shoulder. Haru's movements against him become rhythmical, focussed, his dick a firebrand against Makoto's skin. Makoto drags the backs of his fingers down Haru's back, distracting himself by the

softness of his skin; he kisses Haru's shoulder and then his mouth. Haru breathes a harsh gasp against his lips, and another; Makoto holds him tight and firm, not moving, letting Haru find his pleasure first.

They're both sweating, especially where their bodies are touching, and Makoto wishes they were under the covers, completely under them -- a tiny world for just the two of them, for just a little while.

Haru slows down, stops.

"What's wrong?" Makoto asks.

Haru doesn't answer, not in words -- he rolls to his side, pulling Makoto along with the leg he's got hooked around him. The air feels icy against the places their bodies come apart, and then Haru tries to put a hand around his dick, but Makoto stops him.

"You first," he says. "This time I want to see your face."

Haru's slightly flushed face turns a little darker, but he doesn't protest when Makoto takes him in hand. His eyes fall shut, and he lets Makoto roll onto his back again, pulling Haru on top of himself. Haru's harsh panting in his ear makes Makoto think that he might be able to have an orgasm without being touched at all.

When Haru comes, his mouth comes open, letting loose a single hoarse moan that's going to stay with Makoto forever, together with the sight of Haru throwing his head back and the feel of Haru's ass tightening in Makoto's free hand. Makoto is suddenly overwhelmed with a rush of possessive jealousy, and he understands what Haru said to him the other day. *Don't show that face to anyone else.* The very thought of anyone ever seeing Haru like this makes Makoto's insides writhe like many extremely anxious snakes.

Once he's done, Haru falls away, off to the side, collapsing onto the sheets and throwing his arm out over Makoto. His lower forearm lands in the slippery-wet mess he just made on top of Makoto's belly.

Haru lets out a soft yelp of surprise, and Makoto laughs. He hasn't had an orgasm but he feels as though he has: he's exhausted and his thighs feel watery, even though he's still extremely turned on. He looks at Haru, who's staring at him.

"Come closer so I can do you," Haru says.

Makoto's about to comply, but a buzzing sound comes from the floor where he left his backpack.

"It's probably from my mom," Makoto says, glancing back at the clock atop the headboard. "Wondering where I am." He grabs the box of tissues and wipes his hand, then his belly, and hands the tissues to Haru, who's lifted his come-smeared arm up to let Makoto clean up.

The message is indeed from his mom, wondering if the movie's over yet. It's a good thing he said he was going to the movies, or she would have called instead of sending a mail.

`Yes, sorry; I am almost home.` Makoto sends the text and glances back at Haru. "I have to go."

He also doesn't *want* to go. He lies down next to Haru again and takes his hand, lifts it to his mouth, kisses the back of it firmly. Knowing that his mom is waiting and that she was probably worried is putting his erection to sleep already, at least.

"Isn't it weird?" Haru asks.

"What is?"

"We're like this, right. So are Rei and Nagisa."

"Yeah," Makoto says. He hasn't really thought about it that way. "Why is it weird?"

"Isn't it supposed to be rare, being… gay, I guess?"

Makoto looks at him. "Is that what we are?"

"What else could we be? Do you think about doing this kind of thing with girls?"

Makoto shakes his head fiercely. This he *has* thought about. "No, it's just." He recalls a television programme he saw by chance a few years ago when he was home alone waiting for a delivery while his mom took Ren and Ran for a medical check-up. It had a cheerful young man in leather outfit -- short shorts, tank top, and a jaunty cap -- prancing about Tokyo streets and practicing some strange dance while trying to help people out. He was called gay. "Does that mean we have to wear leather now?"

Haru blinks at him. "Makoto, what on earth?"

Makoto explains about the man on TV. "I thought it was, I dunno, a gay uniform. So everyone can tell he's gay?"

Haru shakes his head and squeezes Makoto's hand, half a grin on his lips. "That guy's probably not even gay; he ended up dating some actress he later married. I know the one you mean."

"So he was just acting?" Makoto's not sure why a person would make a mockery of something he doesn't even understand. "That's a relief. I don't think that kind of outfit would suit me."

Haru cocks an eyebrow at him. "How do you know if you haven't tried?"

Makoto's jaw drops. "Haru-chan, could it be that you want me to wear it?"

"No!" Haru says quickly. "I don't know," he amends. He leans over and presses a dry, soft kiss to Makoto's cheek. "Not in public."

Makoto blushes. "Really."

"It would look cute since it doesn't suit your character at all," Haru explains.

Makoto tries to imagine himself in tight leather shorts but he just can't manage it. Nagisa might be able to pull off such a look -- he's small and cute. Makoto would probably look like the world's biggest idiot.

"What's wrong?" Haru asks. "I wasn't really serious about the leather."

"I know," Makoto says. "I just--"

"We're doing too much, aren't we?" Haru mumbles, turning to the side and pressing his forehead against Makoto's shoulder.

"Maybe?" Makoto says, wondering where that came from. "I-- I don't feel like things are any different from how they were before I came back from Tokyo. Even though I thought everything was going to change. Is that weird?"

"No," Haru says, lifting his head up look at him. "I feel that way too. We were always together, so this kind of thing is--"

"--more together," Makoto finishes. "Together-er." He kisses the tip of Haru's nose. "I don't want to go home."

"So don't," Haru suggests, propping his head up on one hand. "Tell your mom you'll stay over."

"I--" Makoto sighs. "I feel like I'm lying to my parents if I stay over here when they don't know we've become a couple."

Haru just looks at him.

Makoto glances away. "Do you think it's okay to keep this from them?"

"I don't feel good about it," Haru says. What he doesn't say is also clear to Makoto, even though they aren't even looking at each other. But he knows what Haru would say if Makoto insisted: that it's not up to him to make a decision in this situation. That's all on Makoto.

He thinks about what it felt like to rush through that fancy shopping centre with his hand in Haru's. What it felt like to see Rin's face when Haru announced that they were on a date. The warmth of Haru's hand in his when they crossed the old dockside. Rei's tomato-red face when he pushed the sex book at Makoto in the bookstore downtown.

He wants things like that to happen again and again, for as long as possible. He doesn't want to pretend that Haru is a regular sort of friend. He doesn't mind keeping it discreet out in the world, but he can't bear leaving his family out.

Makoto takes a deep breath that tries to be calming but doesn't quite work; his heartbeat has picked right up. "Let's go tell them."

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto takes a longer way home, chronologically speaking, and Haru probably deserves a medal for self-control.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry the chapter is a bit late this week! I've got a nasty cold and can't brain as well as usual, so writing went much slower. ^^;

He looks at Haru, who's now in a half-sitting position, gazing down at Makoto's face.

"You want me to come with you?" Haru asks.

Makoto realises he got too carried away. Sure, he's decided to tell his parents, but there's no need to drag Haru into it. What if they don't accept this? What if they are completely against it and ask Haru to leave? That would be awful. "I'll tell them myself," he says. "I'll, uh. I'll text you about how it went." He starts to get off the bed, but Haru puts a hand on top of his, and though it's gentle, Makoto can't seem to make himself move.

"You didn't answer," Haru says.

Makoto flops back down beside him. "Maybe we shouldn't have this conversation naked," he says. "I can see your, well, everything."

Haru's everything is displaying signs of imminent resurrection. He blushes and rolls away from Makoto, onto his stomach. "Shut up. It's not like I can't see yours. Don't change the subject."

Makotos sits up, and this time Haru doesn't try to stop him. He reaches to pick his underpants up from the floor. "Do you want to be there when I talk to them?" he asks.

"I do if you want me there," Haru says. "That's why I asked."

Makoto puts on his underpants and stands to adjust them. "I do if they aren't going to get angry. If they get angry, I'd rather you didn't have to see that."

"Makoto."

Haru's voice is coming from a much closer distance, but before Makoto can turn around, he feels Haru's teeth on his left butcheek. It doesn't hurt; Haru's hardly pressing down, but the sensation goes right to Makoto's dick, of all the places.

"Haru!" he protests, moving away so Haru can't get him again and turning around as he sidesteps his discarded uniform trousers.

"Don't get all gloomy for no reason," Haru tells him. "You don't *know* how they'll take it."

"You didn't have to bite into me to tell me that," Makoto objects.

"I know. I wanted to, though." Haru stares at Makoto's front. "One part of you liked it."

Makoto should be responsible, he should get his clothes on and march right home, but he wants Haru so much it makes him want to jump out of his skin. He half-stumbles back to the bed, where Haru sits cross-legged near the edge, waiting. Makoto bends to kiss him; Haru's hands link behind his back and pull him in, then back down to the bed. He can't remember why he was going to leave.

Haru pushes his boxers down just enough to expose him; Makoto can't move freely with the elastic across his thighs, but that seems to be exactly what Haru wants. He tips Makoto onto his back and slides in close, shoves his leg between Makoto's knees and wraps a hand around Makoto's erection.

All the excitement Makoto pushed away earlier floods back into him, with not a drop gone; it's as though he knew he wasn't going to get home before Haru was done with him. He leans up a bit to kiss Haru's neck, and Haru stretches it out for him, his breaths coming faster and noisier when Makoto's tongue makes contact.

"You want to come on top?" Haru asks, working a finger underneath the tightly stretched top band of the boxers across Makoto's thighs, trying in vain to push them further down. His hand pauses on Makoto's dick.

Makoto shakes his head. "This is good," he whispers. "Don't stop."

Haru shifts to catch his earlobe between his teeth, and Makoto thinks about those teeth on his ass and how nice that felt. Haru murmurs, "I want to try using my mouth," and sweeps his thumb across the head of Makoto's cock.

Makoto's spent an embarrassing amount of time since last Friday thinking about Haru's dick in *his* mouth, but he hasn't considered the reverse at all, and just thinking about it tears the last of his self-restraint to shreds. He can practically feel Haru's soft tongue where his thumb is, and Makoto arches off the bed, desperate for it to happen yet knowing it's too late. Haru's hold on him tightens; Haru's free hand grips Makoto's shoulder as Makoto lets go, spilling into Haru's loose fist with a gasp that sounds like it's coming from somebody else.

When he's done, Makoto pulls Haru close and tries to come up with a plausible reason to give his mother for why he doesn't need to go home tonight, why there's no need for either of them to move and why they should fall asleep just like this.

After a few moments, Haru puts paid to Makoto's clearly delusional frame of mind and extricates himself. "I'm gonna clean up."

Makoto glances at his watch and sighs.

"I'm going with you, by the way," Haru says, exiting.

*

"I'm home," Makoto calls from the doorway. "I've brought Haru with me."

"Oh, good; come on in!" his mother calls from the kitchen. "Are you boys hungry?"

Makoto is so hungry he could win an eating contest against Nagisa, but everything'll just taste like old shoes if he tries to eat now, nervous as he is.

"I, um, actually, Mom? Can you come here for a second?"

A moment later, his mother peers into the hallway, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "What is it? You took a while coming back, is everything all right?"

Makoto blushes, grateful for the low light in the entryway. "I-- we. We've got to talk to you and dad," he says.

As his mom tilts her head to the side in puzzlement, a long-cherished memory surfaces in his mind: his mom and dad, sitting him down on a cushion in the guest room and saying they have to have a Family Talk. That was when they told him about the twins in Mom's belly. There have been other family talks since then -- like before Grandpa decided to remarry, when Mom went back to work part-time, and after Haru's parents asked the Tachibanas to keep an eye on their son -- but that first one was always Makoto's favourite. It was the first time he felt like he was an important part of the family, not just a silly little kid.

"It's um… a family talk," he finishes. His palms begin to sweat. "Just with you and dad, though." He doesn't mean to exclude the twins; he will tell them, too, but only if his parents think it's okay for them to know.

Mom's eyes widen, but she nods. "It's their bathtime anyway; just wait in the guest room, boys."

"But I wanted to take a bath with Haru," Ren says, popping out from behind Mom's back.

"Me too!" Ran adds, peering out from behind Ren.

"I'm not staying over," Haru tells them. "Listen to your mother, okay?"

"Okaaaay," they chorus and let themselves be herded back into the house.

Makoto and Haruka enter the guest room and sit quietly side by side. Makoto wants to say something, but there really isn't much to say.

Makoto's mom appears a few minutes later. "Dear, could you come to the guest room, please? Makoto's got something to discuss with us," she calls as she takes a seat opposite them.

In the living room, the television shuts off. "Be right there."

Makoto wants to interject that he's not the only one who's got things to discuss, but it's not like he's going to make Haru talk on his behalf. So he waits until his dad shuffles down the corridor. He's not surprised his dad came over without asking what this was about -- his mother usually calls him Mako-kun. *Makoto* is reserved for when he's done something very bad, like steal Grandpa's dentures when he was five, or very good, like pass the high school entrance exam almost three years ago.

Mom is giving him an inquisitive look -- *which one is it this time, Mako-kun? good or bad?* but Makoto pretends not to notice her and instead stares past her at the aquarium he set up for the four goldfish Haru gave him last year. It turned out that goldfish needed proper tanks to live long lives; keeping them in a bowl was what killed the ones he got from his fisherman friend in elementary school.

Dad takes his slippers off at the doorway, enters the room, slides the door shut, and takes the cushion next to Mom. "Well, what a sour-faced bunch you are tonight. What's going on?"

Makoto looks at Haru, who is also gazing at the fish. No help there. They *did* agree that Makoto would do the talking, but he could at least--

Haru turns to him and gives him a small smile.

Makoto inhales deeply. This is a family talk, and there is no point with lengthy lead-ins or weather chit-chat.

"I-- Haru and I have decided to start dating," he says.

Truthfully, he wants to look everywhere but at his parents, but he feels like he needs to see this through to whatever end.

Of course, he can only really look at one of them at any time, and his mother's immediate reaction is obvious relief. For the life of him, Makoto can't understand why. He looks to his dad, who's reaching for his shirt pocket -- a habit left over from when he used to smoke.

"Was that all of it?" his mother asks after the silence between the four of them rolls out a bit too long.

"Y-yes," Makoto says, puzzled. He didn't know what to expect, but somehow he's sure he didn't expect *that*.

His mother lets go of a long breath. "I was afraid you met some girl in Tokyo and got her in the family way."

"Mom, I'm only eighteen!" Makoto says, scandalised.

His father points a finger at him. "That doesn't mean you cannot get someone pregnant; quite the contrary."

"That isn't what I meant," Makoto says, but he really doesn't want to be the one to explain to his parents that he understands the practical use of a condom, so he doesn't elaborate. "Besides, if I'd done that with a girl, why would I bring Haru with me?"

"Moral support?" his father suggests.

Makoto sighs.

"I'm joking!" his father says, holding up both hands. "Well, are you two *sure*?"

Makoto looks at Haru, who turns to look at him at the same moment.

"Really sure," Haru says.

"Yeah," Makoto follows up. "Very sure." He's so happy that Haru spoke first, and he's not even sure why.

"But you haven't even had a girlfriend," Dad points out. "Neither one of you. How *can* you be sure?"

"Dear, is there something you have been hiding from me?" Mom asks in a very sweet voice, leaning in towards him a little.

Dad blinks at her. "I-- no? What does that have to do with this?"

"Well, you *seem* to be implying that you *must* try it both ways before you know which you prefer. Am I to take that as confirmation that you've had an affair with a man?"

"I have not," Dad says, waving an invisible white flag and shooting an apologetic glance in the boys' direction.

Mom sits back with a smile. "I thought so." She turns back to Makoto. "Well, I don't know what to tell you. I've seen this happen in a few dramas, but honestly I've never even thought about what I'd say if it was one of my kids. Be careful?"

"Y-you aren't angry?" Makoto ventures, looking from one parent to the other.

His father frowns. "Why on earth would we get angry?"

"I told you before, Mako-kun, you can always rely on us."

Dad nods. "We didn't raise you so we could tell you how to live your life."

Makoto smiles at them, and it's the first time he's been able to smile since he walked through the door. That was hard. Coming home should always make a person smile. Makoto hopes he never again has to enter this house without a smile on his face.

Shouldn't have thought that your family would ever make you feel like you couldn't smile, stupid.

"What about your parents, Haru-kun?" Makoto's father asks. "Have you spoken with them about this?"

"Don't be silly, dear, this isn't the sort of thing you can talk about over the phone. They'll come home for New Year's as always, right?"

Haru nods.

Makoto decides he doesn't want to think about what Haru's parents are going to say. They haven't exactly taken an active part in Haru's life for the past few years, and it's up to Haru alone to decide if he wants them to know. He decides to discuss that with his mother in private, later.

"So how about some food?" Mom says. "I made meat and potatoes, but we do have some fresh-pickled mackerel too, Haru-kun. Kuwabata-san brought it over this morning."

Makoto is even hungrier now that he's feeling so relieved, and Haru hasn't eaten anything since the movie theatre snack they had, either, so they both nod eagerly and follow Mom into the kitchen.

Dad shuffles back into the living room, and soon the TV is going again.

*

"When Haru-kun goes home, make sure you walk him back," Mom says to Makoto once they've cleared the plates away. She turns to Haru. "Unless you'd like to stay over? It's getting a bit late."

Haru shakes his head quickly. "I, uh-- not tonight, thank you."

Makoto knows how he feels. It's going to be a little strange to talk to his parents about sleepovers, now. Unless his parents think that by 'dating' they mean the strictly hands-off, platonic sort. But they've got to know better. *Right?*

"And I should be getting back; I still have homework," Haru adds. Makoto follows him out.

Haru doesn't speak until they reach the doors to his house. "That went better than I thought it would," he says.

"Yeah," Makoto replies. He wants to talk about this more; he wants to know what Haru thought of everything everyone said. But not now, not tonight. Haru needs time to think about it alone. "Let me kiss you goodnight."

Haru lets him in, and Makoto kisses him right there at the entrance. Maybe it's his imagination, but kissing Haru feels even better now that what they are to each other is no longer a secret to his family. *I wonder what it will feel like when it's no longer a secret from*

anyone who matters. Then again, maybe it feels better because they've done it a few times now and are no longer so hopeless at it.

He pulls away to look at Haru, searching his face for some sign that it feels better for him, too. But Haru just looks up at him with that steady blue gaze Makoto always falls for, no matter how many times he sees Haru's eyes. "What is it?"

Makoto's mouth finds Haru's again, and he keeps his tongue back this time, brushes his lips against Haru's lips, closes them around Haru's tongue when Haru pushes it into his mouth, sucking on it. Haru draws back with a look of astonishment.

"You don't like it?" Makoto asks.

Haru shakes his head and tilts his face up again. "Do it more."

Makoto does, wrapping his arms tightly around Haru's waist, tugging him closer, and Haru's breathing turns ragged, his hips snap up, his hands on Makoto's chest grab fistfuls of Makoto's shirt, holding on tightly as if to keep Makoto from pulling away again. And then he moans into Makoto's mouth, longer and louder than he ever has, and Makoto promptly decides he'll be staying a good while longer, because there's something else of Haru's he'd like to put in his mouth.

Just as he's about to start making a try for undoing Haru's jeans, it is as though Haru senses his intent -- he lets go abruptly and steps away.

"You have to leave," Haru half-wheezes. "Or I'm not gonna let you go home tonight."

With that, he pushes Makoto out the door and slides it shut. A moment later, Makoto hears the latch engage.

He bites his lip and savours the curious blend of frustration and happiness welling up in him as he makes his way home. Frustration at being forced away from Haru. Happiness at knowing that Haru's feelings are strong enough for calm, level Haru to come so close to losing control in Makoto's hands.

[tbc]

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto gets a late start, and Nagisa is the last to know things, for once.

*

The morning dawns pale grey and damp: the sort to make you want to lie in bed and stare out through the gap in the curtains, squinting as you try to figure out if the rain's started yet. Makoto is usually the first to awaken on school days, but today he must be the last: from downstairs comes the sound of the newscast and the smell of grilling fish, and from the bathroom ring the voices of the twins.

It's no wonder, given how much trouble he had falling asleep last night, thinking about Haru, about what they would have done if Haru didn't physically put him out into the street last night. Haru's the one who's been reading that book of Rei's; Makoto still has only vague ideas of how things are supposed to work, but he knows now that there are ways of touching Haru that can make him speak in that hoarse bright-eyed whisper. And that was just the first way Makoto's discovered--

Abruptly, he rolls out of bed and walks to the window to fling the curtains all the way open and lower the blinds. The last thing he needs right now is to get all excited. They've got school, then swimming club practice, and then Makoto's got his first cram school session for this term. He won't get home until late, and who knows if he'll even get to be alone with Haru at all.

That thought alone is enough to distract him, though not in the way Makoto wants. The strange, new feelings he didn't know what to do with just a few days ago have already put down roots so deep that Haru's absence is something he can *feel*. As he trudges out to the bathroom after the twins vacate it and brushes his teeth, as he puts on his school uniform, he tries to figure out when, where, how he can get Haru alone today.

"I'm guessing you haven't told the kids yet," his mother says quietly as Makoto accepts a bowl of rice from her at breakfast.

"Sorry?" Makoto asks, looking at her blankly, and then remembers why he was walking Haru home last night in the first place. "Oh. No. I'll ask Haru to come over tomorrow so we can tell them together. Maybe we'll go to the park."

"That would be nice. Why not today?"

"Cram school," Makoto murmurs, turning to his food.

Ran leans over the table and peers into his eyes. "Why are you whispering with Mom?"

"You'll find out tomorrow," Makoto tells her. "But only if you're good."

"Is it a surprise party?" Ren asks. Not to be outdone by Ran, he practically drapes himself across the table, sending his empty soup bowl clattering to the floor with a misplaced elbow. "Oops."

"You have to be good until tomorrow, and then you'll find out," Makoto tells him as he dives to the floor.

"We'll be good!" Ren brandishes the bowl he's retrieved.

"Very good," Ran confirms. She's still leaning in, as if hoping to glean a clue from watching Makoto eat.

"Come on, you two, let your brother eat in peace. Your friends are probably waiting outside already," Mom says, hustling the twins out of the kitchen.

Makoto finishes his breakfast and makes his own way out the door. Haru comes strolling down the shrine stairs just as Makoto gets to the street. And just like that, Makoto's unease vanishes. Who cares if they get to be alone today or tomorrow or next week? Just seeing Haru is enough to lift his spirits, and the smile on his face isn't even a little bit forced.

"Good morning," he says as Haru stops in front of him. "Sorry for making you wait."

Haru shakes his head and looks intently at Makoto's mouth, long enough for Makoto to start wondering if Haru's about to kiss him. His heart begins to pound.

Haru reaches up and swipes his thumb against the left edge of Makoto's chin, frowns, licks the pad of his thumb, and does it again. "Toothpaste," he explains to a thunderstruck Makoto, who wants to hide his face in his hands. Or possibly sling Haru over his shoulder and carry him upstairs to his room.

*

"Rei!" Makoto calls as he and Haru exit their classroom after the lunch bell. "Want to have lunch with us?"

Rei, who was walking past their classroom with an absent-minded look, stops and turns towards them, blinking rapidly, as if bringing himself back from a faraway place. Makoto feels he can really relate.

"I'm going to buy lunch right now," Rei says. "Are you two going up to the roof?"

Makoto nods, hefting his lunch box.

"Can you tell Nagisa I'll be right there?" Rei asks with a hand on his glasses. Makoto's almost certain he's trying to hide his face on purpose.

"Sure!" Makoto says, and Rei sets off again with a nod of thanks.

"I forgot to make lunch," Haru says over his shoulder as he follows Rei down the hallway.

Makoto sighs and makes his way to the roof, where Nagisa greets him with an avalanche of chatter about absolutely everything *except* Rei, and Makoto wonders what's been happening between these two. He feels a little guilty for not paying more attention to how his friends are doing. On the other hand, he really needs to accept that concentrating on anything but Haru is going to be difficult for the foreseeable future.

Nagisa tells him about the winter festival the community centre is planning to raise money for rural areas still struggling after the Great East Japan Earthquake. While Makoto's genuinely interested, he can't help noticing that Nagisa seems to be making a deliberate effort not to look at Makoto as he talks, and the tone of his voice is high-pitched, nervy; he sounds like he would hate to be interrupted for any reason. *What on earth is going on with these two?*

Rei and Haru arrive ten minutes later; Rei with curry bread and Haru with mackerel-filled rice balls. Nagisa starts telling Haru about the winter festival, and since Makoto's already heard all of it, he doesn't feel guilty tuning him out as he watches Haru unpack the rice balls with precise, spare movements.

He glances guiltily at his own food. Since they're dating, shouldn't he make sure Haru has a homemade lunch? Then again, there was no time this morning; he would have gone to the store too if his mom didn't make lunches for the whole family. Maybe tomorrow he can wake up extra early and make a lunch box for Haru.

There's still time until the bell once they're done eating, and the four of them kind of gravitate towards the south-facing railings, where a group of first-year girls were eating earlier but have already left. Down below, the pool looks kind of sad beneath the cloudy sky, but the happy glow in Haru's eyes as he gazes out over the water makes up for the missing sun-sparkles.

"Just a couple of more hours until practice," Makoto says, meaning it for Haru's ears only, but it comes out louder than he expected.

Nagisa snickers. "Mako-chan, have you caught Haru-chan's water addiction?"

"It's not an addiction," Haru says, leaning sideways on the railing with one elbow and turning to look at Nagisa so Makoto can only see the back of his head. "More importantly, what's been the matter with you?"

Nagisa's eyes widen. "Me? I have no idea what you mean."

Haru sighs. "You've been talking like you'll die if you stop to catch your breath. That means you're hiding something."

Nagisa turns to Rei on the other side of him. Rei hides his eyes.

"Guys?" Makoto prompts.

Nagisa sighs. "Fine. Rei-chan and I have become a couple, you see."

The searching look he gives Makoto and Haru makes Makoto wonder if that was what he looked like to his parents last night. "And?" he prompts, hoping that Nagisa will take his smile as encouragement, even though Haru's probably pulling an impatient face right now.

Nagisa takes a really deep breath. "And it's okay if you guys don't want to hang around us any more, since we're like this."

Makoto is so astonished that he can only blink. He looks at Rei. "You didn't tell him?" But that's a silly question. Of course Rei wouldn't have told Nagisa anything; it wasn't something of Rei's to tell, after all.

It's Nagisa's turn to look nonplussed. "Tell me what, Rei-chan? You were kinda quiet when we talked about this, now that I think back on it."

"We didn't really talk about it," Rei says very patiently. "You just decided everything for yourself."

Nagisa pouts.

Haru sighs as he straightens, backs up against Makoto, reaches for both of Makoto's arms and tugs them across his midsection. Makoto tightens his hold almost instinctively; he doesn't even care if there are other people still on the roof watching them. He's wanted to be close to Haru since he opened his eyes this morning, and although he's completely embarrassed by Nagisa's wide-eyed, frank stare, he's not about to let go of Haru's waist. Not when Haru fits so well against him.

"That's how it is," Haru tells Nagisa, who's sporting the fiercest blush Makoto's ever seen on him. Come to think of it, it might be the *first* time he's ever seen Nagisa blushing.

And then Nagisa seems to find his voice again. "Since *when*?"

"Since none of your business," Haru replies in a slightly haughty tone.

Makoto really wishes he wouldn't. It's not a competition, and though they've talked about their feelings reaching back years, they didn't actually do anything about those feelings until Friday. Which is still less than a week ago. And he wishes he could contradict Haru, but he doesn't want Haru to move. If he could spend the rest of the day on this roof with his arms around Haru, it would be a wonderful day. He wishes they were alone so he could find out what kissing Haru's neck from this angle would feel like.

Nagisa whirls on Rei. "You knew?"

"Only since Saturday," Rei says, a touch defensive. "But they didn't tell me or anything."

Nagisa puts his hands on his hips. "Then how did you know?"

Rei adjusts his glasses and then turns his nose slightly upwards. "I happen to be very observant."

"So observant you didn't even notice I fancy you."

Rei blushes. "That's different. I don't have very good judgement when I'm-- um. You know."

They seem so caught up in each other that Makoto starts to feel like an intruder. "You want to leave them to it?" he murmurs into Haru's ear. "The bell's about to go anyway."

Haru nods, and then he's gone from Makoto's arms, leaving Makoto to wish he hadn't said anything. But once the door to the stairwell shuts behind them, Haru turns around swiftly and backs Makoto against it. "Kiss me."

Makoto wants nothing more than to do exactly as he's told, but he knows it's not going to stop at one kiss. "If I do that, I won't be able to concentrate on anything for the rest of the day."

Haru sighs and rests his cheek against Makoto's shoulder. "We've only got two more classes left and then it's club practice."

"I've got cram school later," Makoto tells him, feeling thoroughly miserable. He doesn't like to refuse Haru anything, even if there's a good reason for it, and right now he doesn't *want* to refuse him.

Haru glances up at him. "Already? Mine doesn't start until next week."

He sounds so disappointed that Makoto hugs him, tightly. The bell signalling the end of lunch break rings.

"Those two are about to come through here," Haru says.

Sighing, Makoto lets go of him, and the two of them make their way back to class.

Although they hadn't even done anything, Makoto still can't concentrate for the rest of the afternoon classes, until, near the end of the last lesson, Haru casually leans over from his window seat and places a folded sheet of notepaper on top of Makoto's textbook.

It's a drawing of a muscular Iwatobi-chan striking a bodybuilder's pose. The very bottom end of the sheet is folded carefully in on itself, so tightly that Makoto doesn't even notice it at first. Anti-teacher countermeasures.

The note in the fold reads *I'll come meet you after cram school.*

[tbc]

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

> In which Makoto is a little bit oblivious, future plans start to materialise, and Haruka is kind of sneaky.

*

The air conditioning unit for Makoto's cram school building is broken, and the electric fan the instructor brought in and placed by the half-open window has done nothing but stir the air a little. In a classroom of fifteen students sitting so close in their rows of desks that their elbows touch their neighbours when they copy from the blackboard, a little fan like that does nothing but frustrate the people sitting near it.

Makoto is glad he sat near the door instead of the window and he's grateful when the teacher's beeper goes off and the session is at an end. Yamanoshita, who was sat next to him last term but ended up two rows behind him this time, catches up to him on the stairs as he hurries out, loosening his tie.

"Long time no see, Tachibana-kun," she says, falling into place beside him. "Did you have a good summer?"

"Yeah!" he tells her, grinning. Aside from spending most of it in Tokyo, it has turned out to be the best summer of his life so far. "How about you?"

She returns his smile but shakes her head. "Spent all my time helping out at the farm." She nods in gratitude as Makoto opens the building door and gestures for her to go ahead. "I can't wait to get out of this town, how about you?" she continues as they step out into the street, where a sea breeze is starting to pick up momentum. It feels glorious against Makoto's sweat-drenched skin.

"I'm not sure," he tells her, looking around for Haru. "It has its bad points, but it's home, you know?" He spots Haru sitting on the stoop of a shuttered store by the next corner, forearms over his knees as he stares at Makoto and Yamanoshita.

"I'll see you next week, Yamanoshita-san," Makoto says and hurries to Haru. "You really came," he says, offering Haru a hand up.

Haru takes his hand and rises. "Friend of yours?" he asks, nodding in Yamanoshita's direction. Makoto turns around to see her walking towards the bus stop.

"We're just in the same prep class," Makoto says with a small shrug. "She goes to that school on the other side of Sano Hill, what's it called? Where all the farm kids go?"

"Don't remember," Haru says. "How come your hand is so sweaty?"

He presses the pad of his thumb to the middle of Makoto's palm, and Makoto realises their hands are still clasped loosely.

"No air conditioning up there, so my everything is sweaty," Makoto explains, gently freeing his hand to wipe it on his trousers. Haru's expression begins to look a little bit stormy. Makoto offers him his hand again, quickly. "It's better now, right?"

Haru looks down at Makoto's hand and then back up at Makoto's face. "You don't mind if those guys see us?" He nods towards the cram school building.

Makoto looks back again. A group of students is filing out, loudly discussing the pro-baseball upset most of the rest of the town's been buzzing about since yesterday. "I don't think they'd notice us either way," he says, still holding his hand out. "But I don't care if they see."

He's thought about this a lot, especially since yesterday. Of course not everyone will be as supportive as his parents, as kind as Rei and Nagisa, or as matter-of-fact as Rin, and it's not like the two of them are going to try and make a spectacle of themselves in public. But Iwatobi's a small town: to some extent everyone is in everyone's business. Even if Makoto and Haru go out of their way to hide their relationship, word will get out; it always does. And when word does get out, some people might think they tried to hide it because they're ashamed. And Makoto refuses to let anyone think that he's ashamed of being with Haru.

Sure, he might feel near-tears embarrassed for his reactions to Haru touching him. He might feel like a fraud when Haru looks at him as if Makoto is the most important thing in the world. But that has nothing to do with the sort of shame that fills you up with a dreadful coldness, the sort that can stick around and intrude upon your thoughts for years. No -- he wants to brag about Haru, to show him off, to make sure everyone knows that Haru is with him. If standards of propriety didn't exist, Makoto would go hoarse from yelling about how much he loves Haru from every rooftop in the country.

Haru takes Makoto's hand and pulls him around to head back home.

Makoto stumbles a bit as he follows, pleased that Haru's eyes are clear again, and abruptly remembers what used to be behind the shutter Haru sat by. A print shop. It went out of business last year. "Talk about timing," he mutters, thinking back to his conversation with Yamanoshita.

"Timing of what?" Haru asks.

"Oh, no, I was just thinking out loud," Makoto explains and tells Haru about the conversation on his way here. "I just told Yamanoshita that Iwatobi had its bad points, and for some reason you were sitting near proof of one bad point."

"That shop went out of business?"

Makoto nods. "Yeah. Out-of-towners don't really come down here much, so you see a lot of closed doors and shutters, don't you?" The tourist-flush downtown is all gleaming storefronts

and immaculate pavements and decorative street signs. His dad works for the town tourism association, and Makoto usually hears all about the new programs long before they're implemented. They never touch this part of town, though. "If there's no money in it, there's no money *for* it," he finishes.

"That's how it is with small towns these days, right?" Haru says with a shrug.

Makoto thinks about Yamanoshita, how sure she sounded that Makoto, too, would want to leave. And who can blame her? Most young people do leave this town and other towns like it -- all over the prefecture, all over the country. When Dad helps put together photos for tourist brochures and the town website, nearly everyone in them is over forty-five or under twenty. *Life changes when you become an adult.* "It just makes me a little sad, I guess," he says to Haru. "Do you want to leave Iwatobi, too?"

They turn the corner to the sideroad that'll lead them out to the port. A delivery van careens past them, music blaring out its open windows. Haru glares at its tail lights and pulls Makoto away from the side of the road. "I don't know. I wouldn't make a good fisherman."

"Or a farmer," Makoto supplies, smiling. He hopes Haru won't really try to be a fisherman. The ocean is too scary of a workplace, in his opinion. "Have you decided what you want to study in university?"

Haru shakes his head. "I don't really care as long as I get to swim. Maybe kinesiology, so I can become a swimming coach."

"Is that what Coach Sasabe studied?"

"Yeah. He even went to the national university out west."

Makoto's eyes widen. "Wow, really? It's a surprise he is delivering pizza if he went to a national university. And he's such a good coach, too."

"He told me he likes Iwatobi too much to leave." As they pass the docks, Haru turns to look out at the ocean, and his expression becomes distant, dreamy. "Maybe I'm the same. I don't think I'll know until I've left once or twice."

"I wonder about that," Makoto says. "The university's just an hour's train ride away. I'm not sure it counts as leaving." He doesn't say anything about Haru's grades or mock exam scores. Neither of them are anywhere near the top of the class, even though they're not near the bottom, either.

Makoto's going to try entering that university: it's got one of the top graduate programs for veterinary science in the world, and though it's a joint venture with two other schools, admission preference is given to those who finish its undergraduate course of study. It's become the top choice for Makoto since he decided to stay with Haru, but now that Haru seems to be considering it too, that changes things a bit: the campus dormitories become a possibility. But he doesn't want to come on too strong or appear presumptuous. "Living on campus might count as leaving, though," he says finally.

"If we both get in, we could live on campus together. Like roommates," Haru says, starting up the shrine steps. Makoto follows, even though he knows he should be getting home. But how is he supposed to leave right after what Haru just said?

"That would make me happy," he says when they reach the top of the stairs. It takes him that long to come up with a response that wouldn't completely embarrass them both for its cheese factor. "Let's do our best to get in together."

"Then I can have you all to myself every night," Haru adds in a tone that's so deadpan it's clearly deliberate.

Makoto thinks apologetic thoughts in the direction of his house because there is no way he's going home now. His face feels really hot. "Haru," he mutters. *His* tone is almost accusatory even though he doesn't mean for it to be, and he's trailing behind Haru like a lonely puppy, not quite helpless but feeling close to it. And then they're back to exactly where they left off last night, only this time Haru isn't pushing him out the door.

"You said that on purpose, didn't you?" Makoto asks when they come up for air.

Haru's eyes flash with challenge. "What if I did?" He tightens his hold on Makoto's shirt.

"I'm all gross from sitting in that classroom," Makoto explains, easing Haru's hands away. "I really do need a shower this time."

"So take one," Haru says, nodding towards the hallway where the bathroom is. "I'll wait." With that, he toes off his shoes and goes inside. Makoto hears the television come on. Sighing, he takes his own shoes off, helps himself to a towel from the linen closet, and shuts the bathroom door behind himself.

As he starts to undress, he decides now's the best time to text his mom, because otherwise she'll probably call to see where he is just as things are about to get interesting. Parents and childhood friends seem to have a knack for that sort of thing, Makoto's discovered.

`Stopped by Haru's place for a little bit. I'll be home before the kids' bedtime -- I remember it's my turn to read with them. I ate during break at cram school so don't worry about dinner.`

Makoto slides the phone shut, puts it in the clothes bin and looks at his watch before removing it. Just about an hour and a half until he has to go home. *Better hurry up and shower quickly.*

As he gets under the spray, Makoto reflects that for another couple, taking a shower together might be a nice thing, but he's showered with Haru so many times after club practice that it feels about as intimate as watching TV together. Maybe taking a bath together would be nice -- they haven't done that since they were kids -- but that would take too long, so not tonight. Even the sight of Haru's mostly unclothed body isn't always special -- aside from the first time they swam together after sharing their first kiss, Makoto is too used to seeing most of Haru to get too excited about it. It's all about viewing angles and shadows, about secret places

no one else sees, about the way Haru's muscles flex underneath Makoto's fingertips, not just in front of his eyes.

A jolt in his lower body pierces Makoto's consciousness; he looks down at himself to discover that he's given himself a massive boner. Blushing, he pumps soap into his hand from the dispenser fastened to the wall and concentrates on getting clean, though he keeps thinking that showering with Haru would become really intimate if erections were involved. And that's exactly why they can't do it, not as long as they're in a swim club together and have to take communal showers.

Makoto rinses off, towels dry, and puts his uniform back on, since he doesn't have any fresh clothes and he didn't think to go upstairs to see if there's anything in the drawer. Plus, his parents might have valid questions if they see him coming home in casual clothes instead of his uniform, which his cram school expects students to wear.

Haru's still in the living room with the TV on, but he's not watching; he's at the table reading Rei's sex book. He looks up at Makoto with a slight widening of the eyes. *That was quick.*

"I have to be home in an hour and a bit," Makoto explains, walking over to sit down behind Haru, so that Haru's back is flush against his chest. "So I hurried."

Haru tips his head back onto Makoto's shoulder. His hair tickles Makoto's chin.

Makoto glances at the page Haru's got open. It's a picture he remembers: green-haired young man with his back turned, spreading himself open with both hands. Makoto's face grows hot again as he remembers what the text said about mild soap on fingers being put in certain places for a more thorough cleaning of said places.

Haru turns the page to a series of illustrations of a cartoon penis at different stages of entering a cartoon butt.

Makoto looks away, mortified.

"I got the address for that website from Rei, by the way," Haru says. "Where he got the book?"

Makoto stares at the television, not really seeing it. "Are you in a hurry to do that kind of thing?" he asks, nodding vaguely in the book's direction. After all, condoms and lubricant are only really important for one thing, in their case, since neither of them have had other partners.

"Not really," Haru says after a brief silence. "It's kind of scary, sticking stuff up there. Doesn't really feel comfortable if it's more than a finger."

Makoto starts. "You've tried it?" *And what does he mean by more than a finger?*

Haru turns slightly to look at him. "I figured I might as well. Since we'll probably end up doing it."

"Oh." Makoto blinks at him. "I thought, um. I thought I'd be the one to, you know. I don't know what it's called. The person getting it stuck up there."

Haru flips back a couple of pages. "Bottom. Also known as the catcher," he reads out, blushing. "But in all the pictures here, the shorter guy is always on the bottom." He flips forward a few pages to show Makoto what he means. "See?"

"That makes no sense," Makoto says with a frown. "If you're bigger in size, then you must have a bigger, you know. Space. Back there. So either way you look at it, it's got to be more comfortable if the smaller person puts it in." Thinking about sizes reminds him of what Haru said at the drugstore the other day, and he squeezes his eyes shut and presses his face against Haru's shoulder. "Anyway, we don't need to do it at all. There's no rule that says we have to."

"I dunno," Haru says, as if unaware of Makoto's acute embarrassment. "I thought about what it might feel like so I want to try it. Just not, like. Now."

"We couldn't do it now anyway," Makoto mumbles, relieved. "Not without that stuff we tried to buy." He should have guessed, though: between the two of them, Haru has always been the curious one, and once his curiosity is piqued, he can get pretty serious about it. But what does he mean by *thought about what it might feel like*? Does that mean Haru's been thinking about Makoto doing that to him, the way Makoto's thought about Haru doing it to *him*? And will Makoto ever be able to talk about this stuff with Haru like a normal person, or is he doomed to be in permaboner mode?

"We could do something else," Haru suggests, twisting around so they're almost face-to-face. "Why's your face so red?"

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto finds an unexpected reminiscence and Haru almost finds some words. Almost.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Of course my face is going to be red, talking about things like that!" Makoto says, glaring a little.

Haru shrugs. "It's not like we were doing anything." *Talk is cheap,* in other words. He puts the book down on the table and shifts so he can face Makoto, and places his right hand on the back of Makoto's neck.

Makoto leans in to kiss him, but Haru pulls away abruptly. "You didn't dry your hair properly," he says with a frown, pressing his fingertips to the nape.

"We're inside," Makoto points out. "Besides, it's hot."

Shaking his head, Haru gets up and walks out into the hallway. Makoto sighs and rises to follow him, figuring that's what Haru expects. Before he makes it to the door, Haru reappears with blowdryer in hand.

"Thanks," Makoto says, reaching for it. "You didn't have to bring it all the way here--"

"No, let me do it." Haru crouches next to the TV stand and plugs the hairdryer into the power strip. "Come sit here."

Makoto complies, remembering a cold spring morning years and years ago.

He's about done getting ready to go home after Sunday practice at the swimming club when he spots Nanase Haruka -- the boy from the house by the shrine -- sitting in the locker room, fully dressed, and rubbing his head frantically with a towel.

"What are you doing?" Makoto asks, surprised at his own boldness. Nanase has always given off a kind of scary vibe, like he doesn't want anyone to approach him. So even though Makoto has often thought it's a waste that they live so close by but haven't become friends, whenever he's had the chance to talk to Nanase, he's always chickened out.

"Trying to dry my hair, obviously," Nanase replies. "Mom said I'm not to go outside until my hair is dry." The towel is covering half his face, and his one-eyed glare makes him look like

an unemployed cartoon ghost.

Makoto suppresses a giggle, realising that if he laughs now, Nanase will misunderstand and think Makoto's making fun of him. "There's an electric hair dryer on the wall there, don't you want to use it?" he suggests, pointing towards the shower entrance.

Nanase lowers his hands and turns his full attention to Makoto. His eyes are so huge Makoto actually takes a step back in surprise. "Hair dryer."

Makoto nods, pointing again. Their coach did show it to everyone on orientation day, but come to think of it, Nanase wasn't at orientation.

"Oh," Nanase says. He gets up, dragging the towel off his head, and approaches the hair dryer mounted to the wall in its plastic bracket. "I thought it was a phone," he mutters.

Makoto can't take it; he bursts out laughing. "Why would there be a phone in a place like this?"

Nanase shrugs. "I dunno, adults are weird. Stop laughing like an idiot."

At some point between Makoto helping Nanase work the dryer, waiting for him to finish with his hair, and walking together to the shoe lockers, they do become friends.

Makoto turns his head to the side a little as Haru switches the dryer on. "Don't tell me you're returning the favour from way back when, Haru-chan," he says.

"I can't hear you," Haru replies over the noise of the hair dryer. He leans forward a little. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," Makoto says, smiling. Haru wouldn't admit to being quite so sentimental, even if it's true. Not in words, anyway. "Just talking to myself."

Haru fluffs Makoto's hair lightly on one side, and Makoto's insides explode into butterflies. He always likes it when Haru touches him, but this kind of absent-minded, fleeting touch is special; it's proof that Haru's feeling relaxed. The air from the hair dryer is warm, but there's a comfortable shiver building along Makoto's spine, intensifying every time Haru's fingers brush against his hair. A news segment has come on TV, and though Makoto's back is to the screen, he tries to listen, just to divert the sudden onslaught of emotions. However, he's pretty sure that tuna prices in space are not the cause of global warming, so either he's too distracted to process the information correctly or he's been listening to a comedy show.

Haru switches the hair dryer off and sets it down on the floor. "Your hair's really fluffy," he remarks.

"I love you," Makoto blurts, turning around on his knees to face him. He doesn't mean to; it's just what he's been thinking. Haru's eyes cut to the floor; Makoto puts his arms around Haru's shoulders and leans in to whisper in his ear. "Sorry. I know you don't like hearing that kind of thing."

Haru turns his head and presses his mouth to Makoto's. One half of Makoto dreads that this is going to become Haru's preferred method of making him be quiet, regardless of their surroundings -- and much harder to counter than Haru's stripping response to water. The other half of him hopes for it. He tips Haru carefully onto his back, straddles him, pins his wrists to the floor, and kisses his mouth, his lower jaw, his neck, letting his lips linger where Haru's pulse is closest to his skin, like an echo of Makoto's own heartbeat.

He releases one wrist and hikes Haru's shirt up clumsily, strokes his belly with the flat of his hand, and his breath hitches when Haru leans up into the touch and shifts a bit so Makoto's hand ends up even lower. Makoto lets go of Haru's other wrist and sits back to run his fingertips down Haru's exposed stomach, then the backs of two fingers, stopping just above the part where Haru's shorts rest against his skin. He feels like he's been served a plate piled high with his favourites and he doesn't know where to start.

Makoto bends to kiss Haru, who pulls his head down with both hands and makes the kiss so deep that parts of Makoto he didn't even know existed feel like they're on fire. He slides the hand he's not using to brace against the floor down Haru's chest and pulls the shirt up higher, then kisses away from his mouth, along the neck and down over his upper chest, shirt and all, and lower still, forgetting where his hands are, forgetting where his everything is.

He grips Haru's hips firmly and presses his open mouth to the bulge in his shorts, breathes out heavily. Haru makes a noise that Makoto doesn't understand, so he looks up.

"Is it okay?" he asks. Haru *was* the first one to say he wanted to try this, and he can be a bit precious about competition.

Haru has raised himself up on his elbows, and his eyes are dark and so intent that Makoto guesses he doesn't really care who gets to do it first. Haru nods so slightly it's barely a movement at all; it's the sort of thing Haru does when he doesn't want anyone to know how much he wants something.

Makoto doesn't bother taking off Haru's shorts; it's easier to just pull them down enough to expose his front. Besides, it wouldn't be good to get sweat on the tatami, so it's better if the clothes stay on. He scoots back so his face is right up against Haru's lower body, elbows on either side of Haru's legs, and stares at the slight curve in the underside of his dick for a beat. Then he shifts his weight to one elbow and circles the base of Haru's dick with his free hand.

He thought it was going to be really easy to just… put it in his mouth; it was easy enough in his fantasies, but now that he's about to do it, Makoto's less certain. It looks way bigger this close up; Makoto's not sure if he can get it even halfway in. Which is probably normal, but for some reason he's had this idea that he would be able to go all the way down.

He likes that he's the first and only person to see this. Lots of people have seen them both naked -- showers, hot springs, public baths when there's a water shortage in winter. But being this close to Haru when he's turned on, feeling the heat of his arousal in such proximity makes Makoto feel really good just by itself.

"Don't look at it," Haru mutters, edging away a little.

Makoto glances up at him with mild exasperation. "How do you expect me to put it in my mouth if I can't see it?"

Haru bites his lip. "Somehow."

"Why don't you want me looking at it?" Makoto asks. It's not the first time Haru's complained about him looking, and while he'll do as Haru wishes, he'd like to understand why Haru wishes it.

"I dunno," Haru says. "It looks weird when it's like this."

"Erect?"

"Don't say *erect*," Haru grouses, blushing. "Anyway, it looks weird."

"Do you think mine looks weird too?" Makoto asks, a little concerned. He's never really cared about what it *looked* like; he's assumed guys all look more or less the same down there.

"Huh? No," Haru says with a frown. "Yours is fine."

"Then yours is too."

"No it isn't." An epic glower starts on Haru's face.

"It is to me." Makoto wraps his hand around the base of it and gently strokes the underside with his thumb. He can do that much without looking.

Haru lets loose a sharp, noisy breath. "So w-why aren't you looking?"

"You *said* not to." Despite his growing vexation, Makoto keeps his tone very even. Haru's obviously hung up on this for some reason, and he doesn't want to make him feel any worse.

"If you don't think it's weird then it's okay," Haru mutters, almost aside. "You can look."

Makoto grins. "For as long as I want?"

Haru glances away. "If that makes you happy."

Makoto leans in, tightens his hand around Haru's dick, and swipes his tongue across the tip of it. "Making you feel good makes me happy."

Haru lies back down and puts his hands over his face. "Do that again."

Makoto doesn't need to ask if he means the tongue thing or the really cheesy line thing. With Haru, he just can't help saying things before thinking about how embarrassing they're going to sound. He bends to tongue Haru's dick again but kisses it instead, and the sudden rush of sensation from his lips right to his lower belly and his own cock surprises him. He doesn't know if it's the slippery texture or the heat or the overall intimacy, but he didn't expect this to feel good for *him*. He kisses the sides of Haru's dick, experimenting with more and less pressure, flicking the tip of his tongue out and pressing it flat to drag it upwards.

He sneaks a look at Haru, who's gone eerily quiet. Haru immediately re-covers his face with his hands, even though he was watching intently a moment earlier. "I don't mind if you watch," Makoto says. In fact, he *wants* Haru to watch. *I hope that doesn't make me some kind of pervert.*

Haru peers at him through gaps in his fingers.

Makoto gets a more comfortable grip on Haru's cock and puts his mouth over the head, drawing a gasp from Haru and a sharp uncoiling of heat in his own groin. He has no idea what he's doing: everything he saw in Rei's book has vanished from his mind. All he remembers is that teeth are very bad, so he angles his head in a way that his teeth are nowhere in play.

He was right; it only fits about halfway into his mouth before he feels like it's too far. So he pulls back and then moves back down, trying to get lower, concentrating so hard that there are moments he forgets how turned on he is.

Chatter and laughter from the TV drowns out Haru's soft gasps, but Makoto can still hear all the embarrassing wet noises his mouth is making, and he hopes Haru can't hear them, because he imagines it's all a bit what a hungry piglet face-deep in slop sounds like. *No wonder many people prefer to play music while they do this sort of thing.*

But he can *feel* Haru's breathing go ragged as his hips start to shift restlessly, trying to go deeper; Makoto's lips press together instinctively to keep Haru from inching too far; his hand at the base of Haru's dick tightens to hold him down. Haru moans and bucks upward, gentler this time, and again, but out of sync with his previous movements. It's Haru's control unravelling, shredded away by the anticipation of pleasure, and Makoto wishes he could see Haru's face clearly, but Haru's head is thrown back so all he can see when glancing up is the underside of his chin.

There's a rapid *flowing* sensation near the silk-thin skin beneath Makoto's lips, then Haru's hips snap up once, and warm liquid splashes against the roof of Makoto's mouth, bitter like way too much salt -- and then a couple of times more, as Haru moans, still softer than the TV but enough for Makoto to hear him. Though Makoto obviously knows how this part goes, he didn't think about what he was going to do, so one Haru stills, he pulls back to swallow the whole mouthful, and then carefully tucks Haru's cock back into his shorts.

"Come here," Haru says, reaching for his face, and Makoto wipes his lips with the back of his forearm and crawls over to lie down next to him.

"Why'd you do that?" Haru whispers, taking his hand. "Just spit it out."

"Where?" Makoto whispers back. "You want me to get up and walk all the way to the kitchen sink? Why are we whispering?"

"Doesn't it taste nasty?" Haru asks out loud, his voice a bit scratchy.

Makoto thinks of another really cutesy line but this time he manages to control himself. "Just a little bitter. Besides, you taste things with your tongue, so if you didn't want me to taste it,

you should've pulled it out."

Haru looks at him. "You were on top of me holding me down; how was I supposed to--"

"I'm not serious, Haru-chan." Makoto squeezes his hand. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Well, let me do it too," Haru mumbles sleepily. "In a minute."

"There isn't time," Makoto says, rolling in to press a kiss against his cheek. "I promised my mom I'd be home." At home awaits the third shower he'll take today, but Makoto is fairly certain this one will be the most fun of the three.

Haru sees him to the door, and Makoto really wants a proper goodnight kiss, but he'd like to try and calm down at least a little before he walks into his house. So he gives Haru an extremely restrained kiss before walking out into the lamp-lit street outside.

"Makoto."

Makoto turns around. "What is it?"

"About what you said," Haru says. "After the hair dryer. Thing."

I love you. Makoto hopes Haru won't ask him something impossible, like not to say it any more. "Yeah?"

"Me too," Haru says in the nervy tone of a sportscaster, then swiftly shuts the door before Makoto can even blink.

Chapter End Notes

Please note that there may not be an update next week as I have a thing to go to. Stupid thing. ^^;

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

> In which Makoto doesn't know everything, Haru speaks softly, and the twins discuss select vagaries of gender politics.

Makoto glances over his shoulder to make sure no one's near the shrine entrance, then presses his forehead against the door. The thin slats of wood still remember the day's heat. He can tell Haru hasn't moved: there was no sound of footsteps, and besides, he knows Haru. There's no way he wouldn't wait to find out how Makoto will react to what he just said.

Last night, Makoto walked away after Haru shut the door like this: because Haru wanted him to. Tonight, he stays for the same reason. It's instinct, borne of either his feelings for Haru or the depth of his knowledge of Haru, though to Makoto, those two are the same thing. He can't imagine anyone knowing Haru as well as he does and not falling for him.

But he doesn't know everything.

"Haru," he says in the softest voice he can manage before it becomes a whisper. "You don't have to say anything to me that you don't want to say. I don't mean to make you feel like you do."

"I know you don't mean to," Haru says after a pause. "That's not why."

"Okay," Makoto says. He lays his hand against the door and waits for Haru to explain.

Haru wants the same things everyone wants, be it affection, friendship, warmth, regard, or love. He just wants them on his own terms, which most people don't understand. If someone is willing to give, people think there is an obligation to accept whatever it is, and only natural to give back in kind. But that's not how Haru sees the world. He won't do anything just because it's expected of him -- he's got to want to do it. He's always been quick to make decisions because it's easy for him to know what he wants.

When Haru doesn't know what he wants, it's hard on him. Last year, when he couldn't figure out if he wanted to swim competitively again, was one of the most miserable times in Haru's life since Makoto has known him. So now he can only hope that Makoto being too free with declarations of his feelings isn't causing Haru to feel conflicted about what he wants.

"It's important, isn't it?" Haru says finally.

"What is?"

"Putting how you feel into words."

Makoto thinks for a moment. "I've thought so since the twins were babies. Sometimes even Mom couldn't tell what was wrong when they cried. So once they got old enough to talk and tell us what they were feeling, we were all relieved, I guess. It's nice to be able to do it, anyway. Doesn't mean you need to every time, like me."

"You don't do it every time." Haru sounds mildly disapproving, and Makoto smiles, though they can't see each other. Haru isn't always happy about everything Makoto does, but if Makoto tries to self-deprecate, Haru gets annoyed. Makoto noticed it a long time ago, but always thought that was just how Haru showed his friendship.

"Well, I do it a lot," Makoto amends. "And yes, it's important to me. Telling you, I mean."

"I know."

"I won't do it any more," Makoto offers.

"That's not it," Haru says with mild exasperation. "It's not like I want you to stop doing it." Makoto's heart does a swan-dive, but before he can form any words, Haru continues. "It's just-- when you say it, you make it look... easy. Like anyone could say it. Even me."

Makoto almost blurts that it *is* easy for him to say it, since he means it, but realises that'll make it sound like Haru's feelings aren't real just because he hasn't said some specific words about them.

"I guess my siblings rub off on me," he says. "They say whatever pops into their heads, and I'm with them a lot, so I end up acting like them." *And that's just it*, he realises. *That's exactly the reason.* Without trying, Haru has made Makoto understand himself a little better, once again. Makoto only wishes he could do the same for Haru.

He senses that Haru's at a loss for words, so he quickly shifts to another subject. "Speaking of the kids, will you take them to the park with me tomorrow after school? I want to tell them properly, like we told my parents."

"Okay," Haru says. "Do you think they'll be jealous?"

"A little, probably. But I'm not sure if they'll be jealous of you or of me."

Haru snorts softly. "Of course they'd be jealous of me taking you away."

"But you're not taking me away."

"No, but I want to."

"Haru," Makoto breathes as butterflies fill his stomach. *Didn't he just finish saying it wasn't easy for him to say what he's feeling?* Now Makoto's so dumbfounded that he can't think of anything to say back. But isn't that just because this is Haru, and he knows what a big deal it is when Haru shares his feelings clearly?

Like that one night when they went to the Prefecturals last year, when Haru thanked him for being his friend, for being there always. Makoto just lay there speechless. Haru left the room

to get some air, and Makoto ended up deciding that was just Haru saying *thanks for everything* before he took the leap and confessed to Rin and faded out of Makoto's life.

Just thinking about how empty he felt back then makes the butterflies vanish.

"What's wrong?" Haru asks.

Makoto's hand is still pressed against the door, and he curls his fingers gently, fitting them in between the slats, just to bring himself back to the present. That wasn't real, none of it. Makoto is the one Haru likes. "N-nothing. I was just thinking that this time, you were the one who made it sound easy."

"You just never know what to say because it's weird for me to talk about what I'm thinking."

"That's also true," Makoto says with a rueful grin.

"It's not weird for you, though," Haru says, and the pitch of his voice lowers a little. "And when you say those things, um. I-- I feel. The way I feel when you s-say... I--I want to make you feel that way, too."

Makoto wonders if this is what people mean when they say they feel like they got hit by a bus, but in a good way. "I think you just did."

The latch clicks, and Makoto leans back to let the door slide open. Haru pulls him inside with both hands, avoiding his eyes. Makoto puts his arms around Haru and squeezes. If he could cancel the earth's rotation right now, he would, so he could stay here with Haru until he dries up into dust.

Haru makes a small, displeased *urrk* sound, and Makoto realises he's holding on a bit too tightly. "Sorry." He relaxes his arms a little but doesn't let go. "I have to go home."

Haru makes a snuffling noise. "I know."

"I'm going right now," Makoto says, not moving.

Haru slides his hands up from Makoto's chest to his neck. "Okay."

"Leaving."

"Uh-huh."

"Come with me," Makoto says. He vaguely remembers having worried what his parents might think about sleepovers, but right now he doesn't care what anybody thinks.

"I haven't fed the cats yet," Haru says into Makoto's chest. "And I didn't finish my biology assignment." His breath is warm even through Makoto's uniform shirt.

If Makoto doesn't leave now, he's going to want to kiss Haru, and if he kisses Haru, he's not leaving at all, and then his mom will be disappointed even though she won't say anything because she probably remembers what it means to be eighteen and in love.

Haltingly, Makoto explains this to Haru, who tilts his head up to peer into Makoto's eyes. "I'll start a little notebook," he says. "For every time you have to leave when I don't want you to. When we go away to college, I'll make you pay me back."

Makoto can see at least one flaw in this plan -- first, they have to get into the same university, which is far from a sure thing, and then they have to make sure they're assigned to the same dormitory -- but he can't say he disapproves of the plan in general.

It takes him a good five minutes to find the wherewithal to let go of Haru and start making his way home.

All the way down the stairs he can still feel the weight of Haru's lips on his cheek and the warmth of Haru's breath in his ear. He doesn't let himself think about what it was that Haru whispered to him just before they parted.

It was so softly spoken, it might have been Makoto's imagination that Haru said anything at all.

*

"I want to get crepes from the penguin man!" Ren says, tugging on Makoto's shirtsleeve. They've just crossed the old wooden bridge leading to the children's park and playground.

"Did you bring your pocket money?" Makoto asks, trying to turn around to see where Haru has gone this time -- and hoping he won't have to fish his boyfriend out of the creek they've just passed over.

"No, treat us," Ran says. "Mom gives you more money than us, so it's fair. Or just treat me, since I'm a girl."

"Why would you get free crepes just because you're a girl?"

Ran shrugs. "I don't know? But that's what's supposed to happen, right, Makoto?" Without waiting for him to confirm, she presses on. "When people go on a date, the man always pays. That's the rule."

"No, that's the rule with adults, *stupid*," Ren counters. "Because men work and women don't. So of course the man pays, since the woman can't! But we're still kids."

"What do you mean, women don't work?" Ran complains. "I'm going to work when I get old! As a zookeeper! Besides, *Mom* works!"

"Yeah, but Mom's *married*. She doesn't need to go on dates with Dad any more."

Haru catches up to them. "What's going on?"

"My brother and sister are growing up too fast, right before my eyes," Makoto says, unable to keep himself from sounding a little mournful. Then, to the kids: "Just because two people are married doesn't mean they stop going on dates. Mom and Dad go out together all the time; that's when I stay home to watch you two, remember?"

Ran blinks at this. "Oh. How come we have to stay home? Why don't they invite us too?"

Ren steps up next to his sister, fists balled up. "Yeah! They go out and eat delicious food without us? That's not nice. I bet they even get crepes from the penguin man."

"It's not a date if you bring the kids," Haru says.

"Isn't it?" Makoto asks him, grinning.

"Maybe if they're someone else's kids," Haru amends, blushing slightly.

"Why are you guys looking at each other like that?" Ran demands.

"Like what?" Ren asks, glancing from Haru to Makoto and back.

"With googly eyes," Ran explains, peering up at Makoto, who is at least three times her height yet feels oddly like an ant right now. "Like in Mom's dramas. Are you going to become actors?"

Makoto sighs. He should have known that his plan of finding a nice quiet bench to sit down and calmly explain the situation to the twins was not going to work. "We're not going to become actors," he says with a sigh. "But we are going out together now."

Ran's eyes widen. "Like a boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"No, we're both the boyfriend," Haru says. "It doesn't have to be a boy and a girl."

"Oh," Ren says. "You're lesbians!"

"Don't yell things like that, Ren-chan," Makoto says, smiling apologetically at a passing young couple with a stroller, who both look as mortified as he feels. "And we're not lesbians. That's a word you use when two girls are going out together."

Ran tilts her head to the side. "So girls can go out together? On dates?"

"Of course they can," Makoto says. "If they like each other."

"But then who pays?" Ren insists. "If they're both girls, don't they need a man to come along so he can at least pay for them?"

Haru flicks Ren's forehead. "Don't get so caught up on who pays, or no one will go on a date with you ever."

"Well, which one of you pays when you go on a date?" Ran asks.

Makoto and Haru exchange looks. "We just split it fifty-fifty," Makoto offers. At the movies, each of them paid their own share, and they went splits on the snacks too, the way they always do. So far that was their only real date, but Makoto doesn't see why it would be any different in the future.

"See, that's how it *always* should be," Ren says with a satisfied smirk in Ran's direction.

"Okay," Makoto says, sensing an educational opportunity. "Then we'll go see the penguin man and each pay for our own crepe, since it's only fair, right?"

"Not fair!" Ran and Ren shriek in unison. "You tricked us!"

Haru laughs silently behind his hand, and Makoto can't help but feel a little smug. The four set off in the direction of the crepe cart.

"So does this mean you're going to get married?" Ren asks. "I thought two guys couldn't get married."

"It's true that we can't get married the regular way," Makoto says. "Not in Japan, anyway."

Ran stops in her tracks and glares at Haru. "So are you going to steal Makoto?"

"That's right," Haru says with a mock return glare. "But you can visit him any time."

Ran purses her lips. "What if I want to come live with you? When my friend Mina's parents divorced, she went to live with her mom, but her brother went to live with her dad."

"Mom and Dad aren't divorcing," Makoto objects.

"But you're part of our family. If you leave to go with Haru-chan, isn't that a divorce?"

"No, that's just called leaving the house. Most people end up leaving their parents' house," Makoto says. "Mom left her parents and Dad left his parents, too. Now they're married and raising the three of us. But sometimes we visit our grandparents' houses, you know?"

"Oh!" Ren says, brightening. "Then Makoto will marry Haru, and eventually I'll marry somebody, and Ran will too -- and then we will have *four* different houses where we can all play together, right?"

"Something like that," Haru agrees.

"Isn't that a yellow leaf?" Ran calls.

Makoto squints in the direction she's pointing, but can't see what she means. "It's still only the beginning of September," he says, placing a hand on top of her head. "A little early for the leaves to turn."

Ran pouts. "But I want them to turn right now! The calendar in our kitchen says it's autumn, so the leaves should hurry up and change already!"

"That's not quite how seasons work," Makoto says.

"Yeah," Ren puts in. "It's not like these trees have seen our calendar."

Makoto and Haru turn to look at each other at the same time. Makoto flushes slightly and smiles.

A sudden gust of sea wind dances through the park. The tree crowns around them shiver and sigh, and a flattened drink can rolls busily down the walkway. Ran gives chase, and Ren follows. Makoto's tempted to speed up his pace to make sure they don't run straight into some trouble, but he doesn't. They play here on their own often enough; they don't need a chaperone.

Instead, he takes Haru's hand and sidles closer, hoping that autumn -- with all its homework, cram school sessions, exam registration deadlines, and university applications -- stays away for just a little longer.

[tbc]

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

In which it's Makoto's birthday.

Chapter Notes

Me not having time to update last week kinda threw me off schedule -- this chapter would have been the one posted yesterday, in time for Makoto's birthday. I just had to keep finding time all week to work on two chapters at once. ^_^ This is a one-off birthday thing, though -- next week there will be only one chapter. :D

A little explanation about age: I have always thought that Makoto is already 17 during the show. I know most of the fanarts/doujinshi/other fics are saying he's turning 17 this year (in his 2nd year of high school -- which is logical!) but I kind of headcanon Makoto being the oldest one of the bunch, and just about everything listed him as already being 17 when the anime was airing. Which to me means he's turned 18 this year, and since this fic is set a year from "now", he's turning 19 in this chapter. Hope that makes sense. ^^;

two months later

"Well, that's it for today," Doujima says. "Those of you who haven't mailed your exam registrations yet, remember they have to be postmarked no later than tomorrow. If I were you, I'd take a trip to the post office right now."

Makoto's pretty sure everyone in this room submitted their registrations weeks ago, just like he -- and Haru -- did, but he supposes instructors get paid for these friendly reminders, too.

"Next week we're going over exam procedure, so don't be late!" Doujima calls to the backs of the first few boys to depart.

As Makoto stuffs his practice exam booklet and scattered notes into his bag, Yamanoshita approaches him. "Tachibana-kun, do you have a little bit of time after this? I was hoping you could explain the fifth question from last week's mock exam, since you were the only one who got it right."

"I'm sorry," Makoto says with an apologetic smile. "It's my birthday today, and my friends are waiting for me"

Her eyes widen. "Oh, I didn't know. Happy birthday!"

"Thank you very much," Makoto says. "If we both come here a little early next time, I could try to help. Would that work?"

"Oh." Yamanoshita fiddles with the end of the long braid hanging over her shoulder. "Do you want to meet somewhere else, then? I could treat you to some hot chocolate maybe, in exchange for helping me."

"No need to go to all that trouble," Makoto says, rising. "I'm happy to help if I can." He glances out of the window to see if the rain they promised has arrived yet, but it doesn't look that way. "I'll see you next week, Yamanoshita-san."

The compact-type umbrella his sister presented him with that morning does end up coming in handy: the rain begins just as Makoto turns into their subdivision. He thinks about popping in to the house just to let Ran see him using her gift, but Haru told him to come straight over after cram school, no stops along the way, and Makoto promised.

He pulls his phone out to see if he's missed any calls while it was on silent, but there are just a few mails from relatives. His phone background is a picture of Haru dozing in Makoto's room a couple of weeks ago, after playing video games with the kids all afternoon even though they both had homework. There are so many photos of Haru on his phone now that the memory's running low. Makoto never let himself take Haru's picture before they started dating; it felt too intimate. And it is. There are no compromising photos, but plenty of ones where no one would recognise Haru's face, because it's an expression he only shows to Makoto.

They became so wrapped up in each other for the first month they were together -- stealing every possible bit of time they could -- that their grades were slipping, so they agreed they were only allowed to be alone together on weekends. Lately, Makoto's been sleeping over every weekend, too, and it's harder to leave every time.

Now that the entrance exams are looming ever closer, they're both extremely motivated to do well. Their applications went in -- to the national university in the city, and to two private schools nearby in case they can't get in there. Haru had a bit of a scare when his parents misread the application deadline and didn't wire the fees in time, but Makoto's parents covered it until things got straightened out.

Makoto slides his phone shut and puts it back in his bag before mounting the shrine steps. Moments later, he's being ushered into Haru's living room, where everyone's already assembled: Haru, Rei, Nagisa, Kou, Rin, and Ai.

"Happy birthday, Mako-chan!" Nagisa shouts, clapping, and someone blows into one of those shiny cardboard horns that sound like a cartoon duck in extreme distress. Then there's a renewed chorus of birthday wishes, and soon Makoto's got an armful of presents and a goofy party hat on his head.

"Is it okay if I open these later at home?" he asks of no one in particular. "I want my brother and sister to see them with me."

"Of course it's fine," Kou says. "They're your presents, so you can open them whenever you want."

Makoto's glad to see Kou in particular. Nagisa accidentally caused her to misunderstand the timing of half the swim club ending up in a relationship with each other, and she ended up under the impression that they'd been hiding it from her for months. They have all just made up over ice cream and tears -- mostly Kou's and Nagisa's -- a week ago, but things were still a little strained. Even if it's over a misunderstanding, it doesn't do to ignore somebody's hurt feelings.

"This is probably the last time we'll all get to celebrate like this," Rei says. "Next year, most of you will have gone off to university."

"Aww, Rei-chan," Nagisa complains. "Don't be a party pooper. I feel lonely now."

"Why would you feel lonely?" Rei asks with a raised eyebrow. "I'm not going anywhere."

"And you're all he needs anyway, right, Rei-chan-san?" Rin says with a sly smirk.

Rei's face turns crimson. "Quit making fun of me for that, I thought your name was Rinchan!"

Nagisa frowns and tilts his head. "But his name *is* Rin-chan."

"Rin-Rin if you're a friend," Kou adds, and this time it's Rin's turn to blush.

"Makoto-senpai, is it true that you and Haruka-senpai are trying to get into the national university?" Ai asks in an extremely obvious attempt to change the subject.

"Yes, that's true," Makoto says. "Hopefully we can both pull it off."

"Wow. Good luck! I hope to go there myself next year, so maybe I could ask you for advice."

"Sure!" Makoto says with a smile. "Maybe we'll be in the same swim club once you get there."

"My brother's talking about going back to Australia," Kou announces.

Haru and Makoto both turn their heads at the same time. "Seriously?"

"It's not for sure yet," Rin says with a darting glower at Kou. "But there's this Olympic medalist coach in Australia who once represented Japan. I want to go to Rio in 2016, you know?"

"See, that makes me feel *super* lonely," Nagisa says. "Everyone is leaving, and Rin-chan's going back to Australia."

"It's not for sure, I said," Rin insists. "I'll still take the Centre Test in January, and I applied to a few schools here."

"Including the national one in the city?" Haru asks, perking up. Makoto understands him; being on the same team with Rin again, getting to swim in relays together -- and not getting disqualified this time -- would be wonderful. It is of course not even a question that wherever they go, they're joining the swim club.

For some reason, Rin's cheeks turn a little pink. "Yeah. Since Ai won't shut up about what a great program it has for physical therapy." He's looking pointedly away from Ai, though, and Makoto can't help but wonder what on Earth is going on there. Then Rei picks up the conversation thread and asks Kou what she's thinking about studying after she graduates, and the moment is gone.

A couple of hours later, they're all pleasantly full of gossip, tea, and the cake Haru made together with Makoto's mom, but Rin announces that he and Ai need to get going. "Our train's in forty-five minutes," he explains. "But first we need to walk Gou home."

"We should go too," Rei says. "I've got homework."

"Birthdays should always fall on weekends," Nagisa concludes. "Weekday birthdays are just not enough."

Makoto is inclined to agree, but not for the reasons Nagisa is probably thinking. "I'll help you clean up, Haru-chan," he offers as they stand in the doorway to see everyone off.

"It's your birthday, Mako-chan, you don't have to clean today! Come with us instead, we'll treat you to fancy coffee in town."

Rei sighs. "Nagisa." There's a strange, almost steely tone in his voice, and Makoto marvels at the transformation in Nagisa's face: his eyes are suddenly alert, and he's looking up at Rei like he's the answer to life's every question. It feels like he's accidentally witnessing an intensely private moment, and Makoto looks away, embarrassed.

Rei leans in and murmurs something into Nagisa's ear. Nagisa brightens. "Oh, you guys want to have se--"

Rei claps both hands over Nagisa's mouth. "Nagisa! Come on, we're leaving."

Makoto remembers Rei's scarlet face when they bumped into each other at the bookstore all those weeks ago. *Looks like Haru and I aren't the only ones who've become more comfortable over time.* He returned Rei's book a while back -- to be honest, he and Haru have never really looked at it again after the first week or so.

He also remembers standing here with Haru back when they were taking their first tentative steps in a changed relationship, the night Nagisa accidentally interrupted their alone time in Haru's living room. He felt uncomfortable back then, presumptuous even, that he was seeing a guest off like he lived here. Now he is confident that his place is right next to Haru seeing off their guests. Not here, since it's the house of Haru's parents, but in a place all their own, sometime in the future.

Once the street outside returns to its usual sleepy silence, Haru takes Makoto's hand. "Come upstairs, I want to give you your present."

"I told you, you don't have to get me anything--"

"Too late. Also, last week you said you wanted as many kisses as the years you've lived until now."

That was just pillow talk! "I wasn't serious--" Makoto begins, but Haru gives him a sharp glare, and he puts his free hand up in surrender. "Okay, okay. I won't be picky. It's a present, after all."

Haru squeezes his fingers and kisses his mouth. "One."

"Are you going to count?" Makoto asks. "Eighteen more times?"

Haru glances up at him. "Uh-huh. But you never said where you wanted them, so I'm gonna improvise."

Makoto bites his bottom lip briefly. "Even though it's a school night?"

"Birthdays don't count."

"You're just trying to add another entry to your notebook, aren't you?" Makoto's not even sure if the notebook Haru promised to start back in September even exists -- he's certainly never found it, and he's looked. "I'll have to go home."

Haru rises on tiptoes and kisses the side of his neck. "You're not going anywhere until you get your present. Two."

Three is on Makoto's collarbone as Haru's fingers work his shirt buttons open; four lands on the upper part of his chest, right above his heart. Five is a little lower, close enough to his nipple that Makoto's so tempted to shift to the right, mouth going dry and lower belly squirming; two weeks ago he almost came just from Haru tonguing his nipples over and over. He's still not sure if he's got magical nipples or a magical boyfriend. Or both.

Six is on his mouth again, but by then they're upstairs, and Haru's distracted trying to get Makoto's pants off; it's more like the side of his mouth plus a bit of his cheek, so he gets points for originality. Seven is right below Makoto's Adam's apple; eight, the hollow of his throat.

Haru pushes Makoto down on his unmade bed, tugs his own jeans off and settles between Makoto's legs. Makoto reaches forward to pull him close, but Haru grabs his hand and kisses the palm. "Nine."

"Almost half done," Makoto says with a grin. "I wish I were turning a hundred."

Haru smirks. "That would make me ninety-nine. I doubt you'd care for this in that case."

"I'll still want you even when we're super old," Makoto says with conviction.

"Don't be silly," Haru mutters. "We won't have that kind of energy." He leans in and dips his tongue into Makoto's mouth, briefly. "Ten."

"Make it ten more like this," Makoto whispers. He's lost count of how many times he's kissed Haru already, but it's never enough. They're both long past blushing and feeling self-conscious every time one makes the other's pulse race, but he can't help feeling giddy whenever Haru's like this.

"You've only got nine left," Haru murmurs into his ear, catches his earlobe between his teeth and closes his lips around it. "Eleven."

"Haru-chan," Makoto whines, but Haru's pulling away to move down and deliver kisses twelve, thirteen, and fourteen in quick succession down from his lower sternum to his navel. Haru lays a warm hand over the bulge in Makoto's underpants and kisses just above the low-riding waistband. Fifteen.

Makoto is sure Haru's about to pull his underwear down -- which isn't even the most exciting part. Haru's not exactly shy about using his mouth on Makoto, but he does always curl around so that all Makoto can see is the back of his head. Today, it looks like he intends to allow a clearer view, and the thought alone makes Makoto feel like his dick's about to snap in two from getting too hard.

But Haru doesn't even touch his underwear; he scoots back so his head is level with Makoto's crotch and shoves Makoto's legs farther apart. Kiss number sixteen is near Makoto's left knee, and seventeen's a little closer to his thigh, but on the right.

Haru's tongue pushes against the tough muscle that runs along the inside of Makoto's left thigh, and it's as though there's a whole sheet of nerves tying that part of Makoto to his pleasure centres; he could probably come just from Haru licking there long enough, like with his nipples but a million times more intense. *Eighteen*. Makoto moans softly, and then Haru's teeth score his skin a little closer to the soft flesh of his groin, making him moan louder. *Nineteen.*

When it comes to gratification, they're opposites. Makoto prefers it delayed: he likes being brought to the brink and then pulled away, and again, until he can't bear it any more and can't stop himself from coming. Haru, on the other hand, wants to fall as soon as he gets to the edge.

Luckily -- or perhaps it's a matter of destiny; the distinction's too complicated for Makoto -- their preferences in giving pleasure are similarly mirrored. Makoto's eager to do whatever he can to make Haru as happy as possible in the shortest amount of time. Haru likes to play and tease and watch Makoto's reactions.

"You're all out of birthday kisses," Haru murmurs in that low, pleasant voice he only lets Makoto hear.

Makoto smiles, breathing heavily. "That's too bad. Now I really do wish I were a hundred years old."

"I could give you some extra kisses, but they'll have to come out of next year's birthday fund," Haru says, pulling Makoto's dick out with one hand.

"I don't care," Makoto says, throwing his head back. "That felt really good."

Haru flicks his tongue against the inside of his thigh again."This?"

"Yeah," Makoto wheezes. "Can you--"

He can't finish speaking, because Haru can, and Haru does, kissing and biting and licking at the inside of Makoto's thighs until Makoto's writhing as he struggles to balance on his elbows so he can see what Haru's doing. And when Haru decides it's time for Makoto to come, it only takes a little of the heat and pressure of the inside of Haru's mouth -- plus the way Haru's eyes meet his. Makoto's face and chest burn as he squeezes his eyes shut and lets go, heat searing through his lower body like a whip, and Haru's hands holding him down as he rides it out are the only real thing in the world.

When he's done, Makoto pulls Haru up and wraps his arms around him, struggling to catch his breath. Haru's so hard against his thigh that Makoto thinks he might recover a lot quicker than usual.

"Do you… um." Makoto takes a breath. "You want to try putting it in?"

He's asked before, and each time Haru insists that he wants Makoto to put it in first, but Makoto doesn't want to do it to Haru until he knows exactly what it feels like. The things they've read about it have all been very conflicting: some say a little pain is a normal part of it, others admonish that pain means they're doing it wrong. Makoto's inclined to believe the latter -- and if the former is true, then he never wants to do it to Haru. Though he wouldn't mind if Haru wants to do it to him. As long as it doesn't hurt a lot.

"It's your birthday," Haru says, tightening his arms around Makoto's chest. "So you should do it."

Makoto gets an idea. "But since it's my birthday, don't I get to tell you what to do?"

Haru gives him a half-hearted glare. "*Only* on your birthday."

Makoto sits up a little to glance at the clock. "It'll be my birthday for another three hours."

"If that's how it is, just wait until it's my birthday," Haru murmurs, gazing at Makoto through lowered eyelids.

Makoto lies back down. "Okay, I won't tell you to do anything."

Haru looks relieved. "No?"

"Unless you want to do it."

"I want you to do me."

Makoto lifts Haru's hand to his face and kisses the inside of his wrist. Haru splays his fingers across Makoto's cheek and leans in to kiss him, snug and deep.

"What if I hurt you?" Makoto asks when they pull apart.

"Then we'll stop." Haru's eyes are so intent on him that they seem a darker, stormier blue. He kisses the corner of Makoto's mouth. Makoto hopes Haru never learns that this is the point at which he becomes unable to refuse Haru anything: when his eyes are like this. Not pleading or hoping -- thanks to the twins, he's had a lifetime of inoculation against puppy-like begging tactics -- but insistent, masterful. Makoto would give him anything he wants.

"Friday," he whispers.

Haru's sigh is soft but noticeable. "Not now?"

"If we're going to go that far, I want to stay with you, after."

"Okay. Want your present now?"

"No." Makoto pulls the coverlet up over them both and draws Haru to himself. There are still three hours left of his birthday, and he plans to stay right here for at least two of them.

[tbc]

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

> In which Makoto's mother is not quite a helicopter parent, Haru and Makoto revisit a past conversation, and Haru gets exactly what he wants.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Mako-kun, do you have a minute before you leave?"

"Sure," Makoto says, sticking his head around the corner to look into the kitchen. "What is it?"

His mother, standing in front of an open cupboard, points at the topmost shelf. "Could you get the skewers down? I promised the kids I'd make yakitori today."

Makoto walks over and reaches for the cylindrical box of bamboo skewers. "How did it end up all the way up there?" That's the beer snack shelf.

"Your father, probably," Mom says. "Last time I used them was when his work colleague was here, and Dad helped me put things away afterwards. I found the dried squid where the skewers should be."

"Oh, I thought maybe it was me," Makoto says, relieved. He's often distracted at home these days, since all of his focus is on either Haru or his schoolwork. Makoto's not sure if he would even bother with the schoolwork if there was no promise of sharing a dorm with Haru at the end of it all. He doesn't care how immature that is, even though he probably should.

"You've been doing so well at school," Mom says, as though reading his mind. She sets a handful of skewers to soak in a deep dish so they don't burn while cooking. "Except for English, right?"

Makoto sighs. Very little gets past his mother, even though she's far from a helicopter parent. "I'm not failing or anything like that."

"Isn't it a required subject for your university programme?"

Makoto sighs deeper. "Yeah. I'm sure I can at least pass it."

Mom gives him a sunny smile, the sort that means *we're really not going to do this your way* and is usually directed at Dad. "Why don't we sign you up for English conversation school?

Hashimoto-san's daughter just started going to one, and apparently she's made lots of progress after just a month."

Makoto does his best not to make a face, although it doesn't quite work. "But cram school," he objects. "We're about to start meeting five days a week since there are only eight weeks left until the Centre Test. And I'll still have my regular schoolwork."

Not to mention Haru. Lots of couples don't even see each other during the lead-up to the entrance exams, but Makoto and Haru are not going to become one of those couples. Not if Makoto's got anything to say about it.

"Well, there's always the weekend," Mom says and pats his cheek. "Though you're right, it would be bad to overdo it and burn out." She purses her lips. "Is Haru-kun good at English?"

"I don't think so," Makoto says, sheepish. There aren't a lot of things Haru is worse at than Makoto, but English is definitely one of them. Still, he doesn't like saying anything bad about Haru. "It's a requirement for his programme, too," he adds, hoping to deflect.

It works: his mother brightens. "Why don't you talk to him about taking some weekend classes together? You're always studying together on weekends anyway, so why not make a little extra time for English?"

Makoto fights the urge to duck his head guiltily. He does bring his schoolwork with him every time he goes over to Haru's house, and they *do* study, but probably not as much as his mom thinks they do. "Sure, I'll ask him about it."

He's doubtful Haru's going to go for it, though. He's had cram school five days a week for two weeks already, and since the school pool's been drained for the winter and swim club practice is at the gym now, sometimes he has to leave halfway to make it to class on time. Weekends are the only time Haru can go swimming in peace: early in the mornings at the community centre, before the little kids descend.

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"Conversation school?" Haru murmurs when Makoto brings it up. They're sitting in Haru's living room, which at the moment looks like a tiny tornado made a precision hit on a high school library shelf.

"Yeah," Makoto says, marking his place in the book with a piece of note paper. "It's not a bad idea."

"You hate it though," Haru says and raises his eyes. "Why don't we ask Rin? He's fluent, and Ai's always saying how he's the best English teacher ever."

"I think Ai might be a little biased," Makoto says. Ai's always looked up to Rin an awful lot.

"You noticed, too?"

Makoto frowns. "Noticed?"

"Rin and Ai."

It takes Makoto a few moments to realise what Haru means. "No way," he says, shaking his head with disbelief. "Not possible."

Haru raises both eyebrows. "Why not?"

"You and me, Rei and Nagisa, and now Rin and Ai? Isn't it a little too much of a coincidence?"

"Why?"

"I've never heard of so many people ending up in same-sex relationships all at the same time. I don't think even any of Mom's dramas are like that."

"Maybe that's because nobody makes those kinds of dramas," Haru suggests. "Nobody's ever made a drama about a swimming coach who became a pizza delivery driver, but he exists."

"I guess," Makoto says, dubious. Just because something is true doesn't mean people will be able to relate to it, even if they hear about it on television. But Haru sees the world differently, and sometimes it's like he goes to a place in his head Makoto can't follow at all. It makes Makoto feel a little lonely.

Haru, as though sensing his discomfort, explains: "People think same-sex couples are different. Nobody wants to be different, so they hide it. For all we know half of Iwatobi could secretly be in such relationships. Nobody just talks about it."

"Ten per cent, on average," Makoto puts in. "Not half. So one in ten people. What are the chances that almost everyone in our immediate friends circle is, you know, not into girls?"

"Rin's *definitely* into girls," Haru says. "I think Nagisa is, too. I guess they're into both."

"What about you?" Makoto asks before he can stop himself. He would also like to know what makes Haru so sure Rin's into girls, but thankfully he *can* stop himself from asking.

Haru blinks. "Girls?" He looks exactly as flummoxed as Makoto felt whenever he tried to imagine liking a girl. It's answer enough.

"I'm sorry," Makoto says with a pacifying gesture. "You don't have to--"

"I'm not," Haru interrupts, not looking at Makoto. "Like that time-- never mind."

"Okay," Makoto says, exhaling. He really doesn't like it when things he says cause Haru to struggle with his feelings. He only likes to see Haru's eyes clouded when Makoto's making him feel good.

"No," Haru says, a touch louder than before. He puts his textbook aside. "Do you remember Tanegashima from middle school?"

Makoto wrinkles his forehead. "Tanegashima… Nana? No, Midori." She was a soft-spoken but intense girl with a messy side-braid and a deep love of American football.

"Yeah, her. She confessed to me on our last day."

Makoto's mouth drops open. "You never told me."

"I know," Haru says, a little irritated. "I'm telling you now. I didn't feel anything. I couldn't even make myself feel grateful for her feelings."

He gives Makoto a searching look, as if expecting censure, but Makoto knows exactly what he means. He's received two confessions from girls, but they didn't even register as romantic to him. At first he thought it was because he was so completely stuck on Haru that no one else could possibly distract him. But he's realised, especially lately, that it's more that despite growing up knowing that boys had to pair up with girls and vice versa, he's never once felt that special excitement other boys seemed to develop around girls. He's never wanted to impress a girl, and he never even thought he needed to give any serious thought to having a relationship with a girl.

So when those girls confessed to him, he didn't feel flattered, and though his first priority was to try and let them down easy, that was out of respect for them as people, not because he understood their feelings.

"I get it," Makoto says. "I feel that way too. I mean, when it was me, I did feel grateful for the effort they made, and for being brave, but not their feelings." He frowns. "That's kind of cold, isn't it?"

"You weren't cold when you turned down Murata," Haru observes. "The way you smiled at her made me think she'd maybe have a chance one day." He pauses. "Maybe you made her feel that way too."

Makoto looks at him, horrified. Murata suddenly called him over and confessed when the swim club was getting the pool ready this past spring. She didn't even wait until they were out of the team's earshot before confessing. Makoto turned her down with the truth: by saying he liked someone else. Very quietly. Then he forgot about the whole thing. But now that he's thinking about it, some people do say they like someone else when they're too shy to accept.

"Did it really seem that way?" he asks, wondering if Murata might have left under the impression he was just being shy.

"Maybe just to me," Haru admits, glancing away. "I got really angry."

Makoto tries to remember if Haru seemed especially angry that day, but he can't. That was during the time he was still trying to move past his feelings for Haru, when he barely looked Haru's way at all and avoided being alone with him. "I wish you'd let me know," he mutters. He also wishes his chest wouldn't constrict so painfully whenever he thinks about the time he thought Haru liked someone else.

Haru crawls across the floor towards him, removes the textbook from his lap, and puts his legs on either side of Makoto. "I'm not still angry," he says.

"Oh, that's not--" Makoto stops. They already talked about why he *became strange*, as Haru puts it. He has no intention of burdening Haru with how desperately alone he felt back then, and how bittersweet it still is to know that he was not alone at all. "I mean, I'm glad you aren't still angry."

"Makoto."

Makoto doesn't respond. He pulls Haru to himself and rests his forehead on Haru's shoulder.

Haru isn't having it. "What are you hiding?" he asks, sitting back, eyes scanning Makoto's face. Which he can read like a book; it's absurd that Makoto thinks he can conceal anything from Haru.

"It's not that I'm hiding something," he explains. "I just wish we could have been together sooner. Every time I think about it, I feel a little sad."

"Oh." Haru's mouth loses its worry-tightness. "I thought maybe--" he trails off, but Makoto can tell he wants to be prodded. It's a fine art, knowing when Haru wants a little push -- he doesn't always. Right now, he's still got that searching look in his eyes, as if he's wondering something about Makoto that he just can't read off his face. It usually means that there's something he can only know if he asks directly, but he's too shy or too proud to do it. If Makoto pushes, then Haru can feel that he couldn't help but ask. Win, win.

"Maybe?" Makoto prompts. He links his hands at the small of Haru's back.

"I thought maybe I was making you feel bad."

Makoto blinks. "You'd have to do a lot worse than tell me you got angry at me one time to make me feel bad, Haru-chan."

"Don't say -chan," Haru says, laying his head on Makoto's shoulder. "That's not what I mean."

"What *do* you mean?"

"I just, it's Friday," Haru says, his voice very low. "You said we would, you know."

Makoto bites his lip. He's spent far too much time thinking about that conversation -- and what preceded and followed it -- all week, so much so that just the reminder is enough to make him half-hard. "Can we maybe get a few kisses in first?"

Haru flushes. "Shut up. I just don't want you to force yourself if you don't want to do that kind of thing. We don't have to." His eyes become a little defiant. "Ever."

Makoto feels terribly confused. "You changed your mind?"

"No! I mean yes? I feel like you said you'd do it just because you want to make me happy, not because you want to do it too."

Makoto puts one hand on Haru's thigh and leans in to kiss him, slow and soft. Haru's lips part, and Makoto slides his tongue in just past Haru's teeth, once, and then eases back again. "I never felt like you were trying to force me," he whispers. "I want to do it."

"Now," Haru breathes.

Makoto laughs a little. "No kisses, then?"

"Maybe three or four," Haru says. He jostles the table as he gets up. A textbook balanced on the edge topples to the floor and shuts.

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Makoto's put his fingers in here before, a few times, since Haru likes it, but he's never found it kind of slippery on its own. He looks up at the back of Haru's head with a puzzled expression. "What--?"

"I did it myself before you came over," Haru says, craning his neck to return Makoto's gaze. His eyes glitter in the semi-darkness. "I didn't know it would dry out so quickly."

Makoto thought nothing in the world could make either of them blush again when they're like this, but the part of Haru's face he can see is suddenly quite pink, and his own cheeks flood with heat as he tries to picture what that must have looked like. He wants to tell Haru he'd like to have watched -- first, it's true, and second, Haru's the type to react strongly to words -- but his tongue won't move and his throat's gone dry, because he's realised why Haru was fidgeting so much the whole time they were downstairs.

He reaches for the lube without a word and reapplies it. A lot of it. Everything they've read and looked at said they had to use *lots*, so he uses so much there's a thick gloopy veneer of it everywhere, until Haru starts pushing back against his fingers as if trying to make Makoto go deeper, but Makoto pulls back instinctively, afraid of pushing too deep too fast.

"It's fine," Haru says. "Put it in."

Makoto eyes the toy they bought when they ordered the lube and condoms. "Maybe I should use the--"

"No." Haru rolls onto his side and turns to look at him. "I did that too."

"Oh." Makoto's losing his nerve rapidly. "Are you sure--?"

Haru reaches back with one arm and finds Makoto's thigh, tugs. "Really sure."

Makoto leans over and kisses the side of Haru's neck, then his shoulder. Rei's book said that on the side like this was the most comfortable way to do it for the first time. Makoto grabs one of the condoms, opens it with his teeth. He's practiced doing this all week, and he

manages to roll it on even one-handed. Haru's already drawn his knees up and stuck his behind out, as if he's practiced this too.

Makoto pulls him closer and pushes up against his opening, which feels as solid as a wall.

"It won't go in," Makoto says, somewhat plaintively. He's so nervous he can feel the sweat sliding down his torso and chest, and he tries to angle himself away from Haru so he doesn't get it all over his back.

"Push harder," Haru says. He shifts his hips backwards a little, and Makoto's dick slides down to Haru's balls; all the extra lube makes a loud *glorp* sound. Makoto bends his head down so Haru can't see him suppressing a laugh, but it's unnecessary; Haru snorts, and then they're both laughing quietly; Makoto into Haru's shoulder blade, Haru into his cupped hands.

"I don't think this will work if we're laughing," Makoto says when he finally manages to calm down a few moments later, trying to make his face very serious. "Disrupts the, um. Thing."

Haru titters, and Makoto throws his arm around Haru and holds him close. It's as though all his earlier tension's drained away. He moves his hand down to Haru's knee and draws it up to his chest. "Can you keep it there?"

Haru hooks one hand under his thigh, securing his knee in place. "Like this?"

"Yeah." Makoto positions his dick against Haru's opening again. He knows he has to push harder but although he's much less nervous, he's scared of hurting Haru. But also, now that he's about to go in, he's surprised to find he really, really wants this to work. He wants to slow down even more, but once he gets to a certain point inside of Haru, it's like something *pulls* him inward, and he stops immediately as he hears Haru's muffled gasp.

"Haru?"

"It hurt for like a second," Haru says. "Now it just feels kind of strange."

It does for Makoto, too -- the pressure is stronger than anything he's ever experienced. It's good, but odd, almost as if he's in the middle of a vivid dream. "Do you want to stop?"

"No," Haru says. "Can you, um."

"Yeah?"

"Pull it out, then--"

"I'm hurting you after all," Makoto says, complying hastily. The sense of loss is so intense he barely keeps himself from pushing it right back inside.

"Put it back," Haru finishes. "It doesn't hurt, I told you. If you go slow."

"Then why--"

Haru's cheek turns a darker pink and he turns away. "Because it felt nice."

"Oh." Makoto tries going slower this time, but he's too eager to put it back in, and Haru's pushing back against him with more urgency. There's that gasp again, but this time it's not surprise but pleasure. Haru tenses slightly, and Makoto stills. "Okay?"

"Yeah," Haru breathes. "Yeah."

It's even slower going than Makoto thought it would be, but contrary to his expectations it isn't frustrating; sure, he'd get off quicker if he went a little faster, but he doesn't like finishing quickly anyway, and soon Haru starts sounding like he's having a very good time, though Makoto's pretty sure he's nowhere near the special spot: his thrusts are too shallow to reach that far.

Little by little, they find a rhythm that lets Makoto get deeper, where the pressure and heat are so intense Makoto starts feeling that unreality again, as if he's dreaming, and he grips Haru's leg tighter and mouths his shoulder just to reassure himself it's real. He feels like he's about to come even though he isn't, not really. It feels good, better than he thought, but if they're going to do it again, he wants to see Haru's face, full-on, not in half-profile whenever Haru cranes his neck to look at him with that dazed expression.

"Haruka," Makoto whispers, lips brushing Haru's soft skin. Haru's back arches, forcing him deeper inside, and the last of his self-control evaporates. Makoto moans as he pulls back and pushes in again, still slow but really deep this time -- not all the way, not even halfway, but it's more than enough for him. He's not sure about Haru, but the answer comes swiftly enough.

Haru prises Makoto's fingers off his leg and guides his hand around to his dick, folds Makoto's fingers over it, and then tilts his backside a little higher. Makoto's blood runs hot, the rhythm stutters, and he's coming before he knows it's happening, moaning so loudly he has to hope no one's passing by downstairs. When he's done, his fingers are already slick with Haru's come.

"I'm sorry," Makoto mumbles, easing out of Haru; the pressure was starting to get uncomfortable against his too-sensitive skin. "I thought we'd go longer."

"Let's go again," Haru mumbles, but he sounds so sleepy that Makoto's pretty sure again is going to be tomorrow. He wants to gather Haru into his arms and go to sleep right now, but he's got a condom on, and the bedsheets need changing since Haru didn't have one on.

He pulls Haru to himself anyway. Haru turns around to face him, twines his arms round Makoto's neck and looks at him. His eyes are completely unguarded, as if he's about to dive into calm ocean waters.

Makoto's heard the expression *to fall for someone all over again* before but never fully grasped its meaning.

He understands it now.

[tbc]

Chapter End Notes

There will be no chapter next week -- I've procrastinated too long on my holiday shopping and really need to get it done before it's too late to ship things overseas. /o\ The next chapter will be posted on the weekend of December 7th (barring any unforeseen circumstances). :3

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

In which waking up is easy, but getting out of bed is hard.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Makoto wakes with his arms around the pillow. He's lying on his stomach, and Haru's asleep against his side, arm draped across him, his head heavy on Makoto's right upper back. Makoto doesn't know what time it is, but to look up at the clock he needs to move, which would disturb Haru's sleep. His feet are freezing, because Haru's all but wrapped up in the blankets. It's still grey outside the window, so the sun's just starting to rise and that means Haru isn't late for swimming.

Makoto tries to lie as still as he can and wonders if he should just try going back to sleep, even though he's wide awake. If the sun's rising now, it means they went to bed about nine hours ago, and he's used to sleeping for just six. His nose begins to itch, and he wonders if he can press his face into the pillow extremely slowly to try and scratch it, but he'll certainly wake Haru.

Haru can sleep through earthquakes and tsunami sirens, the school bell, Ren and Ran staging an impromptu recorder and ukulele performance, but he snaps awake at a careless touch. That was something Makoto never knew before they became a couple, but it turned out that the night Haru climbed into Makoto's bed at home and Makoto moved to the futon thinking Haru wanted the whole bed, Haru was awake and heard Makoto leaving; he just didn't react because he didn't want it to be awkward.

This bed is just not big enough for two people, especially when one of them is Makoto's size. He's wondered for a while now how to get around this problem, but short of sleeping separately or pushing two futons together, he can't think of anything. It would be rude to ask Haru to sleep on a futon when he's got such a comfortable bed. But here he is, taking up so much room he probably kept forcing Haru to wake up all night just to get comfortable. He's so embarrassed he could die.

"What is it?" Haru asks in a grumpy voice.

Makoto starts. "I didn't realise you were awake. What do you mean?"

"Your heartbeat suddenly got faster. Does this position turn you on or something?"

"No," Makoto protests, rolling away and letting Haru have a full half of the bed. "I mean, I don't know if it does. I was thinking about something else." He scratches his nose, relieved.

Haru sits up and goes to rub his eyes, but his hands pause mid-way. He wiggles back and forth and winces. "My butt hurts." He rubs his lower back perfunctorily and then yawns as if to say it doesn't bother him.

"I'm sorry," Makoto says, eyes searching Haru's face to see if he's just putting up a brave front. "I--"

"You worry too much," Haru tells him, stretching. "There's muscles that never got used that way before so of course it's going to be sore. It'll go away after I go swimming. What were you thinking about, earlier?"

Makoto sits up as well and uses the opportunity to stick his feet underneath the blankets Haru's pushed off. "This bed," he says, but his earlier concerns seem insignificant all of a sudden.

"Too small," Haru says with a nod, yawning again. "Let's use futons from now on. Three of them."

Makoto can only nod, full of chagrin at himself for not having had the sense to know that Haru wouldn't care if they sleep in a bed, a futon, or a potato field. He's made it obvious that he likes sleeping with Makoto -- though Makoto isn't sure if it's because of him or because Haru's simply discovered he prefers not to sleep alone. He hopes it's because of him, but he'd set himself on fire before asking Haru directly.

Haru rubs his belly. "When we move out, let's buy a huge bed."

"A dorm would probably have bunk beds," Makoto points out. "They wouldn't let us change them, I don't think." Plus, beds are probably very expensive.

Haru offers him a half-yawn, stopping before it can really happen. "I don't mean the dorm. I mean after we're done with school and get jobs and get our own place."

Makoto's heartbeat falters and his eyes go wide. He doubts he'll ever become used to Haru offhandedly dropping gigantic feelings bombshells when Makoto least expects them. Haru's talking about the future -- a far future, at least four years out -- as if it's certain.Though theoretically Makoto knows they've both been in love with each other forever, hearing Haru speak so casually of a shared life makes him so happy there's a lump in his throat, and he'd float up to the ceiling if it weren't for gravity.

Haru stares at him. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Makoto reaches for him and pulls him down into an embrace. Haru grunts in surprise but gives in, stretching his legs out and sliding his arm up Makoto's back. Makoto presses his face against the top of Haru's head and can't trust himself to speak.

"What's wrong?" Haru asks.

Makoto shakes his head. "I'm sorry," he mutters. "I got all mushy even though you don't like it."

Haru tips his head back to look at him. "Is this because of what I said about living together? Isn't that just normal? Why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying," Makoto says. His eyes are just a little misty. "I didn't expect you to say something like that, that's all."

Haru frowns. "Why not? We've always been together, right?"

Makoto hides his face in Haru's hair again, slides one hand to his lower back, and holds him tighter. "Yeah," he mumbles. *If I don't get a heart attack because you keep saying stuff like that.*

"You're squeezing too hard," Haru says, wiggling his bottom underneath Makoto's grip.

"Sorry," Makoto says, releasing him hastily. "I forgot." *I'm an idiot.*

Haru's eyes light with mischief. "You want to kiss it better?"

Makoto sighs. "That's not going to work more than once, Haru-chan." Haru already used that line once when Makoto accidentally elbowed him in the unmentionables while they were play-fighting over the remote control downstairs. Makoto *did* kiss it better that time.

"You *don't* want to kiss it better?" Haru asks, looking very offended. Makoto is almost sure he's just pretending. Almost.

He sighs. "If you think it's going to help, then let me do it."

Haru kisses him instead of answering.

It's funny; the first time Makoto slept over like this, they shared one morning-breath-flavoured kiss and then ran red-faced to the bathroom to brush their teeth, and that went on for a month or so until they figured out that neither of them care how foul the other's mouth tastes, they were just embarrassed about their own. Sex is one of the most unhygienic and smelly things two people can do together, so freaking out over bad breath is the definition of overreacting. Makoto slides his tongue into Haru's mouth, and Haru pulls back, giving him an impatient look.

"What?" Makoto asks, even though he knows already. He smiles sheepishly at Haru and releases him.

If they start the day like this, they don't really leave the bed at all -- even if they get dressed and eat breakfast and start studying, they end up back here more often than not. When Makoto was a virgin, he thought the desire to have sex went away for a while after it happened, the way it did after masturbation, but that turned out to be less than true. And as much as he wishes they could spend every weekend in bed, the university entrance exam scoring machines wouldn't be impressed by the extent of their carnal knowledge.

They sit up side by side with their knees drawn up to their chests, huddling under the blankets. Makoto looks at the clock on the headboard: almost seven. "Don't you want to go to the pool?"

"No, we're going to Samezuka today so I'll swim there."

"We are?"

"We were going to ask Rin to help with English?"

Makoto remembers last night's conversation, which they never did get to finish. "Oh! Did you already arrange it?" He wonders when Haru would have had time.

Haru shrugs. "No, but it's Rin. He never turns down invitations from either of us, haven't you noticed?"

Makoto scratches his head. "But if we go to Samezuka, aren't we inviting ourselves?"

"Rin won't say no."

"What makes you so sure?" Makoto knows Haru's right but he wonders why Haru thinks so.

"He's too proud to admit it so he never invites us himself, but he likes spending time with us. With Rei and Nagisa, too."

"Do you think we should call them--?" Makoto begins, but Haru's already shaking his head.

"Nagisa's dragging Rei to an abandoned amusement park today. He was all excited about it because it's supposed to be really haunted."

Makoto winces. "I hope he brings salt this time instead of sugar," he says, remembering their trip to the condemned swim club last year. Sure, there ended up being a natural explanation for Rin turning up at the same time as they did, but Makoto still isn't too sure that there wasn't at least one ghost in those walls.

Haru rolls his eyes. "That's just old folks' tales. Salt or sugar, it won't do anything."

"If you say so," Makoto says, unconvinced. "I didn't know Rei was into that kind of thing too, though."

"He said he's doing it for science."

Makoto smiles, because that's so Rei-like -- of course he said he's doing it for science, but he'd probably follow Nagisa into a viper pit if Nagisa decided it would be a fun date spot. He feels a little wistful, though -- he wishes he and Haru had time to go places together. Only not scary places.

"Once entrance exams are over, we'll have time to go on dates," Haru says, and Makoto looks up at him, surprised that he'd be so frank about knowing what Makoto's thinking. Haru's cheeks turn pink, and he glances away. "I'm just saying."

Makoto knows that Haru doesn't like it when he makes a big deal out of things like this, so he leans over the side of the bed to fish his phone out of his pants. Then he sends Rin a message asking if he could help them with English today.

"Mom expects us for dinner as usual so we'll need to get back by then. If that's going to happen, we should probably start getting out of bed," he says after putting his phone on the headboard.

"No," Haru says, burrowing into the blankets and against Makoto's side so only the top of his forehead sticks out. "I changed my mind. It's cold. Let's stay in bed."

"But then where will you go swimming today?" Makoto asks with a wry smile. "Our gym is booked for adult classes on weekends, and the community centre's going to be overrun soon unless you hurry over."

Haru stares up at him, somewhat accusingly. Makoto's phone buzzes with a message.

`Guess I'll hang out with you guys since you asked. (￣~￣) Come over whenever, but bring your gear because we're gonna race first. from Rin`

"As expected from Samezuka's captain," Makoto says as Haru peers at the phone, clearly trying to be very casual about it, but his eyes are already aglow with anticipation.

Samezuka almost knocked Iwatobi out of the winter preliminaries last month when Haru had a nasty cold and couldn't participate, but one of the first-years managed to even the score in the 200m freestyle, so both teams moved up the bracket. Almost may not count, but Haru clearly didn't like that they came so close to not even having a chance to compete.

"Rin's up early," Haru says. "Probably jogging. We should do that too. Come on, quit lazing around." He throws the blankets off and swings his legs over the side of the bed.

Makoto hides a smile. "Okay, okay, if you say so."

[tbc]

Chapter End Notes

Gah, adding chapter note long after chapter was posted but please note that there will not be an update the weekend of December 14th! My Yuletide assignment has kind of run away from me, and I urgently need to finish it so it can be beta-read before the due date (Dec 22) so this story will have to wait another week. December is just a really busy month with all the holiday stuff, too. /o\ im sorry)

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

> In which Makoto is completely oblivious to everything except Haru, and Christmas plans are serious business that ought to be discussed outside of bed (but aren't).

*

"Getting colder out there, isn't it?" Ai remarks when Haru and Makoto emerge from the changing room and into the pool area.

Haru dives in, ignoring Ai completely. Makoto offers an apologetic smile. "He's been a little grumpy since we woke up this morning." He realises he's just announced that he and Haru spent the night together and tries not to blush.

Ai looks about to say something, but then Rin appears with an unfamiliar person in tow: a short, quick-eyed guy with extremely close-cropped hair. "You made it," he says with a cursory glance towards Haru in the pool.

"Thanks for letting us come," Makoto says.

"Well since I'll be helping you out later, I'll ask you to help me out now," Rin says. He gestures to the guy he brought along. "This is Kurono Hitoshi, he's a second year who just transferred here from Tokyo. Kurono, this is Ma-- uh, Tachibana Makoto."

"Nice to meet you," Kurono says without even a perfunctory bow, staring at Makoto in a very frank sort of way.

"Likewise," Makoto says, a little uncomfortable. "Transferring in the middle of the school year must be tough."

"It is what it is," Kurono says with a shrug. "The countryside isn't as bad as I thought."

Makoto's never really thought of Iwatobi as the countryside, but he supposes that to someone from a big city, everything is the countryside.

Rin puts a hand on Makoto's shoulder. "This guy's a backstroke specialist, like you."

"Oh, what school are you from?" Makoto asks. He doesn't remember Kurono from last year's nationals, but he would have been a first year then.

"Uchida West, but it didn't have a swim team. I went to a local club."

"A dark horse, huh?" Makoto says with a smile at Rin.

Rin grins back. "Well, something like that. Race him once so he knows what he's up against."

Makoto glances at him. "So when you said we were racing, you meant Iwatobi versus Samezuka, not you versus Haru?"

"Who's Haru?" Kurono asks, looking around.

"I'm Nanase Haruka," Haru says from the pool. "Makoto, give me your hand."

Makoto helps him out of the water with a smile. "That was quick."

"I saw Rin and came over," Haru says, obviously lying. Makoto can tell because Haru won't make eye contact and is squeezing Makoto's hand too hard.

Makoto wishes he could ask but everyone is watching -- it isn't just Rin, Ai, and Kurono; half the Samezuka team is here too. He and Haru have decided to keep their relationship private unless people ask them outright.

"Haru-chan, Rin was just introducing me to Kurono-kun. He's a new backstroke swimmer, from Tokyo."

"I heard." Haru stands right in front of Makoto as he exchanges greetings with Kurono. It's a little strange; he usually hangs back in groups of more than three.

Makoto beats Kurono easily in 100m but after he barely ekes out a win in 200m he can tell he's facing a serious opponent: what Kurono lacks in power he makes up in stamina. They compare their workout habits while waiting for the next race. It turns out Rin wanted Haru to race Ai, not himself, and Makoto, along with most of the rest of the Samezuka team, watches them go at it while Rin keeps time. Haru overtakes Ai effortlessly, and he is as beautiful as always; Makoto suspects that most of the spectators are more interested in him than the outcome of the race. Because the way Haru swims is special, and it's a different kind of special every time.

It makes him feel a little uncomfortable to see the others watching. He doesn't like other people admiring Haru quite so openly. He's not sure when that changed. He used to want everyone to see how amazing Haru is. He still does, but he wishes their eyes wouldn't linger. *This is why it's good that we're discreet about our relationship. Rivals from other schools would come and ogle Haru on purpose to psych me out.*

Haru wants to race Rin next, and even though Rin complains that he doesn't want to race against a winded Haru, they tie. Twice.

"So, you wanted help with English?" Rin asks after they're done showering once the impromptu practice is over. "We can go to my room, or--"

"Raincheck on the English," Haru says. "Let's do that tomorrow. We'll be late for dinner at Makoto's."

He's lying -- it's too early for dinner -- but Makoto's not about to embarrass him in front of Rin and Ai, so he makes his apologies and follows Haru out.

They're back at Haru's house with a little over an hour to spare before dinner, and Haru starts peeling Makoto out of his clothes before they're even through the door.

Makoto's not exactly against it, but he's surprised at Haru's ardour. He's usually much mellower after he gets to go swimming, even if it's a race.

"I was jealous," Haru confesses once they're out of their clothes and in bed again. "That Kuroko dude was ogling you the whole time."

"Kurono," Makoto corrects him. "I'm sure it was just casual; we did talk about our workouts."

"He was totally checking you out," Haru insists. "I asked Rin about him when we finished our race. He got sent away as a reform measure, because his parents found out he's gay."

"What's sending him here going to reform?" Makoto asks, puzzled. "If he's gay, he's not going to change."

Haru shrugs. "I guess people think it's like a fashion trend that only happens in the city and he won't have any gay people here to hang out with."

Makoto furrows his brow. "Oh, I see, so he was checking me out because he could tell I'm gay? People from Tokyo are amazing."

Haru sighs. "He was checking you out because you're hot, Makoto."

Makoto blushes. "I'm not."

Haru sits astride him. "Are you saying I have bad taste?"

"Of course not! I-- um." Makoto has no idea what to say.

"Come here." Haru pulls Makoto up and locks his legs behind his back.

Makoto kisses him. "Haru..."

"I want you in me."

"We have to be at dinner soon," Makoto says. He didn't like the way Haru winced in pain that morning, and he hasn't forgotten it.

"Let's do it quickly."

"Let's do it when we come back," Makoto suggests. Maybe he can rope the twins into exhausting Haru with video games, and he'll change his mind.

Haru kisses the side of Makoto's neck. "Then too."

"Did you really enjoy it that much?" Makoto asks. He doesn't see any other reason for Haru to be so insistent. Not that he's complaining, but he doesn't want Haru to hurt.

"I think you'd like it too."

Makoto brightens. "Okay, so let's do that. You put it in this time."

"You're only saying that because you think I'm in pain."

"Is that wrong? I don't want to make it worse, so let's switch places."

"That means you'll bottom because it can't be helped. That's not the same as wanting to."

"But I do," Makoto protests. "I mean, it's true that I'm not sure what the big deal is but I want to find out--"

"I'm not in any pain," Haru murmurs, his lips soft and warm at Makoto's ear; he was obviously not even listening because he knows very well that Makoto's just trying to be a good sport. "Come on. I want you to make me ready this time."

Makoto's determination crumbles. He makes Haru lie on his stomach and lifts his ass up to his face so he can see what he's doing.

He knows how to rub Haru inside to make him tremble and push back against Makoto's fingers with those faint gasps that drive Makoto crazy. He spends a lot of time stretching Haru open and uses even more lube than he used yesterday. When done, he pulls his fingers out and looks at the opening. Even with all the work he just did, it's so tiny that It's hard to believe his cock could ever push through it. He leans in and licks it. The lube coats his tongue, and the way Haru's lower body quivers tells him he's got a winner.

Haru gasps. "You don't have to go that far," he says in a hoarse voice. "It was fine with just your fingers."

"You said you wanted me to kiss it better this morning," Makoto says, peering at him over his raised ass. "I'm only doing what you asked." He presses his lips against it for emphasis, getting lube all over them.

"S-Stupid."

Makoto tongues Haru's hole again. "You don't like it?"

"I do," Haru mumbles. His face and neck are flushed. "But enough. Put it in." Makoto goes to flip him onto his side, but Haru resists. "No, sit up here. I want to try being on top."

Makoto wipes his mouth dry and obeys him, figuring Haru knows what he's doing. Haru straddles his hips and braces against the headboard with both arms. It reminds him of the first time they had sex here -- before that, downstairs, they started kissing and Nagisa interrupted them, but this was Haru's exact position back then. Makoto still likes looking up at Haru just as much as he did back then.

"Hold it up so I can, um." Haru blushes. "Just hold your dick up."

Makoto keeps very still to give Haru full control and watches Haru's face carefully. His lips are parted, and as he pushes himself down, he bites his bottom lip. The bridge of his nose wrinkles.

"Hurts?" Makoto whispers, letting go of his cock and laying both hands on Haru's hips so he can pull him up if needed.

"A little," Haru admits. "This angle's different."

Makoto stifles a moan as Haru slides a little lower. "You want to keep going?"

"I want all of you," Haru breathes into his ear. "Move your hands down -- no, not away. To my ass. Spread it open more."

Makoto carefully tugs Haru's ass cheeks apart. "Like this?"

"Yeah." Haru rocks back slightly and lets loose a soft sigh. "Makoto."

Makoto kisses his neck with parched lips; his mouth's gone completely dry. He tries to come up with something to say but before he can pick up his scattered words, Haru starts to move. It isn't the slow, languid rhythm they made yesterday; Haru's fast, insistent, almost frantic -- the way he gets when they might get caught. His ass flexes beneath Makoto's hands every time he rides up, and Makoto tries to focus on that movement so he doesn't get lost in the incredible heat around his cock, the sensation of being sucked into Haru's body; if he does, he's afraid he'll lose his mind. But he can't help but notice the constant quiver of pleasure in his belly, the pressure mounting in his balls, the sound of his cock sliding wetly into Haru, Haru's mouth beginning to slacken and his movements to falter.

"There," Haru growls. "Don't move, I'm-- oh." He tips his head back and moans as he lifts his ass just enough to get it in the air and then brings it back down, and again; he cries out, shudders, and then his come spurts against Makoto's chest, in four successive jets, and Makoto's own release pulses out of him, completely unexpected.

When he's done, Haru eases up off him and puts his arms around Makoto's neck, collapsing heavily against him. Makoto holds him close and strokes the back of his neck gently. He had his doubts before, but now that he's seen Haru come untouched, he's sure he wants to try being on the receiving end. When he says it, Haru pulls back and gives him a messy kiss.

He never gets enough of the way Haru doesn't hesitate to kiss him no matter where Makoto's mouth just was. The end of Rei's book cautioned that the novelty of kissing and sex wears off eventually, that there's more to a healthy relationship than mutual physical longing, and while Makoto agrees with this in spirit, he's sure he will never get tired of Haru's kisses. He can only hope Haru will not tire of his. Besides, all the relationships in Rei's book seemed to grow out of mutual desire. Haru and Makoto grew *into* their desire, together. Makoto is sure that makes a difference.

They rest side by side, silent. Makoto's hand lies between them, palm up, and Haru starts drawing on it with a fingertip; it tickles like crazy but not in an uncomfortable way. Haru makes a smiley face, then a kitty face, and then starts writing simple characters: person, day, big, moon. Makoto's hoping for a heart, just because.

"On Christmas, do you want to go on a date?" he asks. He's been thinking about it for a while. It'll be their first Christmas as a couple, so they can take a break from studying.

"My mom will already be home by then," Haru says.

Makoto turns to look at him. "Oh, she's coming earlier than your dad this year? How come?"

Haru shrugs. "Errands of some kind. So since we won't be able to do whatever we want here, let's save for a hotel."

"A hotel?" Makoto wonders what kind of hotel would be good. The ones in Iwatobi are kind of plain and business-person-oriented. "We'd have to take a train into the city so we can have a date at a nice one."

"No, I mean for after the date," Haru says, and draws a heart on Makoto's palm. "Doesn't have to be nice .Just has to let people under twenty rent rooms."

Makoto pulls Haru into his arms. "With king size beds."

"But if it's the city, we could visit the university and look around," Haru suggests, snuggling closer. "Then our parents won't mind if we stay the night."

"Is it really a good idea to lie to them?" Makoto asks. "I'm sure my parents will figure out what's really going on, since they know we're dating."

"Mine know too," Haru says. "I told my mom the other day."

Makoto pulls back to look at him. "You didn't mention it."

"Nothing to mention. They don't mind. I was going to tell you but I forgot."

Makoto exhales. "Well, I'm glad. I was a little scared they would get upset and start to hate me."

Haru nuzzles Makoto's neck. "Don't overthink things. Anyway, it's not lying. We'll really go to the university. We can make that our date."

Makoto thinks about walking around the campus on a crisp December afternoon -- it would be deserted for winter break, and he's never been there so he's picturing the sort of thing he's seen on television: fancy buildings, a large open common… "Maybe we can ask the coach to give us some tips about exploring," he suggests before his imagination runs away with him. "He went there after all. He'd know all the good places to eat, I bet."

Haru's stomach growls.

Makoto laughs. "Let's go have dinner, Haru."

[tbc]

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

In which it's Christmas and there are some small miracles.

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone had a good holiday; here's the slightly late Christmas chapter. ^_^

*

"Isn't that Ama-chan-sensei?" Makoto asks, pointing to the window.

By the time Haru turns to look, the platform has receded behind them and they're gathering speed past the low office buildings of downtown Iwatobi.

They're seated side by side on a train headed into the city for their Christmas date -- officially known as a university visit -- but Makoto's struggling to stay awake. He was at cram school until late yesterday and then he had to stay up waiting for the twins to fall asleep so he could put their presents next to their pillows. Mom offered to do it for him, but this is the last year he was home to do it, and soon enough they'll be too old for Christmas presents. So he wanted to do it himself.

The plan was to sleep in this morning, but the kids shrieking over their Santa haul would have woken even a pile of rocks.

"I don't know what she'd be doing at the train station," Haru says. "She's got a car."

She? Oh right, Makoto thought he saw Ama-chan-sensei earlier. He stifles a yawn. "Maybe her family lives too far away to drive to."

"We're on an island," Haru points out. "Nothing's too far to drive to."

"What if her family's from one of the other islands? A little one, like the one with all the cats that was on the news the other day."

"That's what ferries are for."

"That's what I got Ran for Christmas, by the way," Makoto says, deciding it's better not to speculate further on Ama-chan-sensei's possible cat lady origins lest she materialise in front

of them and give Makoto a thumping.

Haru looks at him. "A cat?"

"A toy ferry," Makoto explains. "For the little town she's building in the backyard."

"What did Ren get?"

Makoto suppresses another yawn. "That basketball game he's been begging Mom for since last Christmas."

"You stayed up waiting for them to sleep, didn't you? That explains why you're so tired."

"I'm not that tired," Makoto protests, somewhat feebly.

Haru reaches over and pulls Makoto's head down to his shoulder. "I'll wake you up when we get there."

"You'll be bored," Makoto whispers, but his eyes are already falling shut.

It turns out to be one of those naps that make you feel like you've slept the whole night, and although usually Makoto is mystified by them -- especially if they happen during lessons in school -- today he knows the reason. He always sleeps better when Haru's with him. It's been that way ever since they were little. It's only lately that Makoto's wondered if it's like that for Haru, too.

They alight right in front of the university campus entrance. According to the map Makoto's dad gave them, it would take at least a day to cover the whole grounds, but they're only here to check out the dormitory and administrative buildings and the main concourse. Besides, most of the areas belonging to the Department of Agricultural Studies are off-limits to visitors without special passes.

Makoto expected some kind of marker that they're entering the campus, but the low buildings of the city block around the station kind of blend into the same-looking buildings belonging to the university, and the only difference is that while the street outside was mostly empty except for a few cars, the sidewalks and roadways of the university are teeming with students, even though it's winter break. It doesn't look much like winter. The morning forecast called for dropping temperatures and possibly freezing rain, but the air is moist and warm, and though all but the pine trees ringing the common are bare, it feels like very early spring.

Haru points to a directional arrow labelled SWIMMING POOL & BATHS. "We have to make sure we get in now, Makoto."

Makoto sighs with feigned pathos. "Because it has a swimming pool? Haru-chan, most campuses would have one."

"Are you two lost?" interrupts a stern-faced, bespectacled woman. Makoto can't tell if she's a teacher or a student.

"We're high school students," Makoto offers. "We just came to--"

"I thought you looked familiar," she says in a no-nonsense voice. "Follow me."

She leads them through a gap between two bicycle parking stands to a stagecoach waiting area and a busload of third-years from the neighbouring prefecture -- specifically, from Koga High, an all-boys school with a strong swim team. One of the boys recognises Haru and Makoto, and the two of them end up going on a tour of the campus that lasts until five. It's much more efficient than wandering around with a touristy map, but a lot less romantic.

Haru and Makoto sneak away before one of the teachers accompanying the Koga boys catch on that they've got an extra pair of students in the mix. They leave the campus and find an oden stand for dinner. Coach Sasabe didn't end up having any recommendations for them, because he was too poor to afford nice food when he was a student, and all he knew were ramen and udon joints near the campus.

Having filled their bellies, the pair set out for their hotel, which turns out to be a slightly farther walk from campus than they expected -- they're both used to Iwatobi distances for walking, but a big city is something else entirely.

The temperature has been dropping just as promised, and when Makoto reaches into his bag for his earwarmers, he pulls out one of Ran's flower-patterned headbands instead.

"You brought that to wear?" Haru asks, adjusting his knit cap. They've stopped in the middle of an empty playground that's supposed to be a shortcut. "It looks a little small."

Makoto stuffs the headband hastily back inside and zips the bag shut. "No, I must've been half-asleep when I grabbed it," he says with a grin and puts his free hand over one ear. "This'll have to do." He gestures with his vending machine hot chocolate. "I'll just switch hands every once in a while. We're almost there."

"Wait here," Haru says, pointing to a swing set and handing Makoto his hot tea. Then he walks off briskly in the direction of the vending machines where they got their drinks.

He reappears a few minutes later, a little out of breath, carrying a convenience store bag. "Merry Christmas," Haru says, opening the bag for Makoto's inspection. "I know we said no presents, but you needed this, and I saw them in the shop window before. Here."

Inside the bag is a Santa Claus hat. His mouth works uselessly; he's not sure what to say. Haru's always taken care of him, but in such a way that let him pretend it was coincidence -- and Makoto has always gone along with the pretense, because that was what Haru wanted. The only time Haru was overt about looking out for Makoto before was during that training camp last year, when Makoto almost drowned in the ocean.

And yet here he stands, Santa hat out of the bag and in his hands now, having run to the convenience store because Makoto's ears were cold.

"Thank you, Haru," Makoto says, even though those words feel empty and hollow, not nearly enough to express what he's feeling. He starts to reach for the hat but has to pause; he's got hot chocolate in one hand and hot tea in the other.

Haru steps closer and puts the hat on Makoto's head, sliding it down over his ears. It only covers them about halfway, and the hat is a bit tight -- probably child-sized -- but Makoto doesn't care. He casts a furtive glance around out of the corners of his eyes and then leans in to quickly kiss the tip of Haru's nose. Haru lets go of the hat and steps back with a pleased expression that's trying very hard to be disapproving.

"Don't just do that in public."

Makoto ducks a little, handing Haru his tea. "I'm sorry." He's not at all sorry for kissing Haru -- he did check to make sure they were alone, and it was only on the nose -- but he didn't mean to cause any embarrassment.

They reach the hotel ten minutes later, right as they both finish their hot drinks. Haru pulls the Santa hat off Makoto's head before they enter. "It's cute," he explains. "A little too cute."

It's not exactly a love hotel -- that is to say, it doesn't advertise itself as one, but like most businesses in this area it tries to cater to the university students, who like a bit of privacy as much as anyone. The dormitory buildings have very thin walls, and there are no private bathing facilities anywhere on campus. The hotel lobby looks businesslike enough: industrial-grey carpet, rectangular sofas, collection of tourist brochures and booklets along one wide wall.

"Welcome," the clerk at the registration counter says with a pleasant smile. "How may I be of service?"

"Um, we have a reservation?" Makoto says. This is the most grown-up thing he's ever done in his life. As much as he loves his Christmas present, he's glad Haru had the foresight to remove the Santa hat.

"Certainly, under what name, please?"

"Tachibana," Makoto says. Nagisa advised that the less either of them said, the better. *Just pretend to be unfriendly out-of-towners* were the exact words he used, but Makoto doesnt' have the acting chops to pretend to be unfriendly. "Also, Nanase," he adds, remembering that following Rei's advice, he put Haru's name on the reservation too, just in case they ended up getting separated somehow.

She clicks some keys on her terminal. "Ah, yes, Tachibana-sama, Nanase-sama." She glances at the two of them. "Are you sure you booked the right room? It's only got one bed. I could switch you to a double if you'd like, we've got several that are free." She is obviously just trying to be extra helpful, but Haru already looks mortified.

"Yes, that was a special online rate when we booked it," Makoto says quickly. "We're students, so--"

"Of course, my apologies." She picks up the phone, and Makoto starts sweating. "Is the manager--? Oh, I see. Thanks." She puts the phone down. "I was going to ask the manager to extend the special rate to a double room for you, but she's already gone for the day. I'm terribly sorry."

"Ah, no, it's fine!" Makoto says, resisting the urge to wave his hands like he normally would. "It won't be an inconvenience." He feels like he should explain why two full-grown men, students or not, would be comfortable in a single bed, but he remembers Nagisa's admonishments. The less said, the better.

On the elevator ride to the fifth floor of the hotel, Haru finally speaks. "I thought she was going to ask nosy questions."

"Me too," Makoto admits. "Do you think we could be kicked out of a hotel if people found out we're actually a couple?"

"I don't think so," Haru says. "But better safe than sorry, I guess"

*

He's been ready for weeks, but Haru's insisted on getting him used to it gradually, the way they did with Haru. It was strange at first, and he thought that there was something wrong with him, that maybe he was missing that special part that makes Haru moan so low and long. But he likes it when Haru touches him, even if it's not making him writhe with pleasure -- then one night Haru's fingers went a little deeper and curved just so, and Makoto did moan, eventually coming so intensely he couldn't stop thinking about it all week.

But they haven't had much time to be together -- even on weekends -- and Makoto's newfound interest in being the catcher had to take a backseat to the frenzied pace of exam preparation. Last week they finally agreed that Haru would top next time, and that happens to be now.

"No," Makoto says as Haru moves up behind him as he lies on his side. "I want to see your face."

Haru kisses his shoulder. "Okay." He flips Makoto onto his back and tugs one of the pillows down to his waist. "Lift," he says and stuffs the pillow under Makoto's pelvis when he complies. He looks down with eyebrows drawn together, then adds the second pillow.

"Won't we get, um, stuff all over the pillows?" Makoto asks, blushing a little at the thought of someone having to wash those pillowcases out.

Haru nods and goes into the bathroom to bring out the spare towel, which he tucks under Makoto so it covers the pillows. "Better?"

"Yes." At least the towel is something Makoto can wash out himself without it looking weird to the people who clean this place.

When Haru leans down over him and gently pushes his legs up to expose him, Makoto knows he made the right choice not doing it on the side. He loves looking up into Haru's face like this, seeing every eyebrow twitch and lip quiver; what's going on below his waist becomes a little bit secondary. Then Haru pushes inside him, slow but steady and so much hotter than his fingers. Makoto squeezes his eyes shut and relaxes as best he can; that's the only thing that keeps the pain away, and he's much worse at it than Haru.

Once Haru's halfway in, he hooks his arm underneath Makoto's knee, then the other one, and pushes his legs higher. "Okay?"

"Yeah," Makoto says. "It doesn't hurt."

It hurts a little bit, just at the edges of him, but it's fading away as Makoto begins to focus on Haru pushing deeper into him.

"I want to move," Haru murmurs into his ear. "Is that--"

"Yeah," Makoto says, and Haru doesn't need to be told twice. He goes fast and shallow at first, just to widen Makoto a little more, and Makoto's erection starts to flag until Haru's fingers wrap around him, and he starts to move deeper and a little slower, seeking Makoto's pleasure first.

The hotel bed's got a fancy canopy of rich, deep blue exactly like Haru's eyes -- but nothing could ever compare to the genuine article, and as much as Makoto likes to see Haru's contented face -- eyes closed, lips parted -- he'd like to look into his eyes, too. Haru shifts the angle slightly, hoists Makoto's legs a little higher up, and, as though reading Makoto's mind, opens his eyes to gaze down at him -- but it's far from the blue serenity that Makoto's used to; Haru's pupils are so wide the blue's almost a memory.

"Makoto," Haru whispers, pulling back a little further than before and then sliding back in so slowly Makoto thinks he can feel every vein of him caress his insides. He spreads his legs wider, rocking up to take him deeper, but Haru stills and leans down to kiss him.

Makoto moans into the kiss, low and desperate; he suddenly wants to come so bad it's making him shake, but he never wants the slow, sure throb of advancing pleasure in his groin to abate.

"Haruka," he mumbles against Haru's lips. "Don't stop."

Haru strokes the underside of his cock with his thumb and squeezes it, mid-thrust, and Makoto starts to come; by the time Haru's all the way inside him again, he's crying out, head thrown back, rocking against Haru's cock, and he's so gone he barely notices Haru's grip on his legs tightening, his eyes going mind-blank, his thrusts going wild. They rarely come together like this, and Makoto's selfishly glad it's happened tonight.

Once Haru regains his composure, he carefully pulls the pillows out from under Makoto and moves them back to the headboard, then lays Makoto down on one. "Are you hurting?"

Makoto smiles at him. "Not at all." He's covered in sweat and *exhausted* -- and he means to at least have a rinse in the shower before going to sleep. Once he's had a chance to rest a little bit. Haru rolls into his arms and pulls the blanket over them; it grows so warm so quickly underneath that Makoto loses all will to move again, and they sleep.

In the morning, Haru's lying on his side facing Makoto. He looks like he's sleeping, but Makoto can tell he isn't by his breathing -- it's not rhythmic or deep. Haru opens his eyes, and

Makoto offers him a smile. Haru lets Makoto draw him in for a loose-armed hug. The towel from last night has wound up all twisted between his knees.

His lower back's a little sore, and it's exactly like Haru described it before: an under-used muscle having had a sudden workout. He understands now why Haru got so annoyed with Makoto for being overprotective back then: this level of discomfort is the same as after endurance training. Only a non-athlete would really notice it.

It snowed overnight, just enough for a delicate spread of white fluff on the outside windowsill.

The bedside clock shows nine-thirty in the morning, and check-out is not until eleven, so they could just lie here together like this for at least another hour, if they wanted. In the morning light, some of the colour has washed out of the room, and he decides he prefers waking next to Haru in a place at least one of them calls home, where the colours are always a little bit faded but never surprisingly so.

What he'd really like above all is a place they both call home, together.

"I want to spend every holiday with you," he says, squeezing Haru's shoulder.

Haru drags the blanket all the way over his head and delivers a gentle but solid punch to Makoto's thigh under the covers. "Shut up."

"Enough romance for now?" Makoto asks, earning another -- slightly heavier -- punch.

"I'll make you wear the Santa hat when we do it on Christmas next year," Haru mutters from his blanket fortress. "How's that for romance?"

*

On the train home, Haru's showing Makoto his study schedule for the upcoming week -- Rei taught him how to make one on his phone -- when his phone buzzes with a message.

"You can look," Haru says when Makoto looks away to give him privacy. "It's from Rin."

The message reads: `What would you do if Makoto stopped being interested in you all of a sudden?`

Makoto blinks. Why would Rin ask Haru a thing like that? *Even the idea is impossible.*

"Do you know what this is about?" Haru asks.

Makoto shakes his head. "Not a clue."

Haru punches the send button on his phone and lifts it to his ear. "Ai dumped you, didn't he?" he says.

Makoto can't hear what Rin is saying in response, but he realises that Haru's right. Rin does tend to ask such questions in a roundabout way.

"Say that in the first place instead of involving other people," Haru snaps. "Do you know the family restaurant next to the post office?" Haru gives Makoto a questioning look.

It's obvious that Haru isn't asking Makoto about the family restaurant; he's asking if Makoto's okay with going there next, to meet Rin. Makoto nods. There's plenty of time until cram school.

"Meet us there in forty minutes," Haru says into the phone.

[tbc]

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

> In which Rin sticks his foot all the way into his mouth, figuratively speaking, and a new year begins.

*

When they reach the family restaurant, Rin's already inside, staring into a mug of something -- probably coffee, no sugar -- with a brooding look.

Haru and Makoto slide into the seats across from him. They got distracted during the train ride and kept trying find out the name of an American movie about leprechauns that they saw as kids, so Makoto didn't get a chance to ask Haru what Rin told him.

"Do you guys attach yourselves at the hip when it's the holidays or something?" Rin mutters without looking at them.

Makoto laughs. "We were coming back from-- uh." He realises he was about to say way too much about how the two of them spent Christmas, which would be unkind, since Rin is having some sort of trouble with Ai.

"We went to see the university," Haru says. Of course; it's simple enough to just say that much. They had plenty of time to visit the university and come back if they left early enough.

"Have you been there, Rin?" Makoto asks, remembering their conversation at his birthday party.

Rin shrugs. "I'm not going there, so there's no point."

Makoto tries to catch his eye. "So it's Australia after all, huh?"

"Is that why Ai dumped you?" Haru asks.

Rin makes a face. "He didn't *dump* me, I told you on the phone it's complicated."

The waitress shows up to take their orders. Makoto and Haru both order the breakfast special; Rin gets another coffee.

"Didn't you eat this morning?" Rin asks them after the waitress is gone.

"We were running late for our train," Makoto explains. Which is true, even though Rin's probably thinking of the train to the city, not the other way around. The hotel did have room

service, but it was too expensive.

"You shouldn't drink so much coffee," Haru says in a fairly transparent attempt at deflection. "It's bad for your heart."

"I'm not even twenty yet," Rin says with a scowl. "My heart will be okay for at least another decade, thanks. Besides, everyone in the West drinks a lot of coffee."

"More importantly," Makoto interrupts, sensing an imminent pointless argument, "What happened with Ai-chan?"

Rin's face falls and he goes back to staring at his coffee. "Nothing really. He was just all excited about Christmas for weeks, but then he went out to the arcade with Kurono."

Makoto frowns. "That doesn't sound like Ai."

"Did you say something to him?" Haru asks.

Rin gives him a look. "Like what?"

"I dunno; something rude?"

Rin shakes his head. "No? I told him to clean up his desk the other day, before the break started, but I'm always telling him to do that."

The waitress brings their drinks -- tea for Haru and a Coke for Makoto. He takes a drink and waits. Rin's got a look on his face a lot similar to the expression Haru makes when he's looking for the right words.

"I can't think of anything," Rin says finally. "I mean, I'm no Makoto, but Ai's never cared that I'm not that nice."

"Don't make fun of Makoto," Haru mutters with a glare.

"I'm not!" Rin protests. "I didn't mean it like that."

Makoto raises his hands to placate them both. "So he was excited about Christmas but then he didn't show up for your date and went out with Kurono-kun instead?"

"Date? We didn't plan anything like that," Rin says.

Makoto blinks. "You didn't invite him to go anywhere with you on Christmas?"

"I figured we'd just think of something the day of, what's the big deal?"

"You're an idiot," Haru says.

Makoto gives him an exasperated look. "Calling him names isn't very helpful, Haru-chan."

"Calling me Haru-chan also isn't helpful," Haru says, turning up his nose. Then he faces Rin. "Don't assume he knows what you're thinking, and don't assume you know what he's

thinking, is what I meant."

Rin looks from Haru to Makoto. "That's exactly how *you* are."

"We were always like this," Haru points out. "You know that."

"I'm sure other couples get like that even without being best friends first," Makoto adds quickly. "It just takes time."

Rin's expression darkness. "Maybe that just means we're not supposed to be together," he says quietly. "Me and Ai, I mean. Almost a year, and-- oops." His face turns bright red. "I wasn't supposed to tell you that."

Makoto's jaw unhinges. "You've been together that long?"

"Not exactly. Look, it's embarrassing, so I'm not going to talk about it." Rin says, still pink-faced.

"He means they started out just having sex," Haru says.

"Shut up, Haru, don't just say that kind of stuff with a straight face," Rin complains.

"What kind of stuff? Everyone our age is having sex, or would be if they could."

Rin's cheeks go from pink back to crimson. "Not *that* kind of sex."

"Why, are you guys into something weird?" Haru asks.

Rin clicks his tongue. "Two guys together is weird in the first place."

Makoto barely manages not to wince. He knows Rin would never hurt anyone on purpose, but to hear something that couldn't feel more natural and wonderful characterised as *weird* really hurts. Rin greeted their news with such equanimity back at the start of term, too.

"If you think it's weird then you're doing it wrong," Haru says with raw anger in his tone.

The waitress delivers their breakfast specials, and they eat in silence so obviously heavy that Makoto wishes he could turn back time and not agree to come here with Haru. His appetite is all gone; he eats just because otherwise it'll be a waste of money. He's not so naive as to believe he and Haru could always avoid people's judgement, the way they've managed so far by being as discreet as they could. He just didn't expect it from a friend.

"That was a dumb thing to say," Rin says in an uncharacteristically soft voice after Haru pushes his plate away. "I didn't mean it about you guys, or anybody else really. I mean it's weird for me."

Makoto remembers Haru telling him that Rin definitely liked girls. He can't be sure, but he guesses it would feel very strange and confusing to start being physical with a guy if a person liked girls.

"If it's so weird then don't do it," Haru says. "And don't drag Ai into it."

"I'm in love with Ai," Rin says, staring down into his lap. "I can't help it." He looks stunned, and Makoto wonders if this is actually the first time Rin's admitted it, or even realised it. It's confusing enough to be having sex with someone you think you're not suited for, but to develop feelings for him on top of that...

"Have you told him?" he asks, even though he's almost sure he knows the answer.

"N-Not in so many words, but..." Rin trails off. "He thinks I'm just using him, doesn't he?"

"I doubt it," Haru says. "We're not in a TV drama. Ai just cares about you and doesn't want to be a nuisance."

"It's not really any wonder he went out with Kurono-kun," Makoto adds. "He probably figured you changed your mind about Christmas and didn't want to annoy you by trying to invite you out when you didn't want to go with him."

"Why didn't he mention it at all, though?"

"Because you're a little scary when you're annoyed?" Makoto explains with a rueful smile. "Anyway, when you get back to the dorm, just talk with him."

"We're back at home for the break," Rin says, his eyes gloomy. "I won't see him until the new year, at this rate."

"So go to his house," Haru says. "And apologise for causing a misunderstanding."

"I'm sure it'll make him happy if you visit him at home," Makoto agrees. Ai's not exactly the kind of person to mope, but he must be sad that he didn't get to spend Christmas with Rin.

Later that night, he gets a text from Rin. `I'm sorry I said that earlier. I don't think you're weird.`

Makoto smiles down at the screen, guessing that Haru must have received a message like this too. He knew all along that Rin didn't mean to hurt them -- Rin has a tendency to speak and act before he thinks -- but it's kind of him to apologise, even if he's doing it in a message.

`Why don't you and Ai meet us at the temple on the 31st? Rei and Nagisa are coming too,` he texts back.

*

The Nanase and Tachibana families have always greeted the New Year at the nearby temple, though for the past four years Haru and Makoto have tended to find their school friends just before midnight, since they've spent the moment with their parents enough times already.

As soon as they reach the temple grounds around eleven, Haru and Makoto sneak away together. It happens without any special agreement on their part; they just let their families keep walking ahead as the two of them fall back. They've barely seen each other at all since

their trip to the city at Christmas, having been busy helping their parents prepare for the holiday: cleaning the house from top to bottom, putting up the decorations, getting New Year's cards mailed out at the last minute.

Haru leads the way through the gap between two food stalls; the vendors are so busy serving people in a hurry to eat their fill of New Year's *soba* before midnight that they don't even glance at the two of them. They walk into the tiny temple garden with only fuzzy lantern-light to guide them along the snow-covered pathways. There isn't any cover here from the snow that's started falling, but plenty of shadowed corners at this time of night and no people, since everyone's out in the main grounds, saying good-bye to the year.

"I don't want to say good-bye to this year," Makoto says softly as they link their gloved hands. He remembers being afraid to take Haru's hand, but nowadays it just happens whenever they're alone; one of them reaches for the other's hand almost absent-mindedly, and that hand is always there.

Haru squeezes his fingers. "Next year will be better." His scarf is wound so far up his neck it's covering his mouth a little, and his voice is a little muffled.

They spy another couple further up ahead and turn towards the old refectory, in the shadow of whose wall Haru stops to face Makoto, pulls his scarf down and gives him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Makoto puts his arms around Haru and they stand like that while the snow continues to fall. He'd like to find a warm place where they can hide away together and kiss to their heart's content, but this is a time to be with all of their close ones, not just the ones who are closest. Haru's been a little distracted, too, and Makoto wants to ask why, but he knows that whatever it is, Haru will tell him when he's ready.

"We should get back," Makoto says after a while, brushing snowflakes off Haru's shoulders. "They'll wonder where we went."

"They know exactly where we went," Haru points out.

Makoto has to admit he's got a point; their moms both teased them about why they weren't holding hands on the walk here. In the end, they compromised by letting Ren and Ran walk between them and holding *their* hands instead, much to the twins' delight.

"Then let's see if we can find Rei and Nagisa," Makoto says, rubbing the tip of his nose.

Haru snickers. "We'll probably find them back here sooner than out there."

Makoto smiles. "Speaking of which, do you think Rin will come with Ai?"

"Dunno," Haru says with a shrug. "Rin's his own worst enemy."

As they make their way back to the bustling area outside the temple gates, they run right into Haru's mom and dad by the food stall line; Ren and Ran are pestering them to buy candy. The two families have been close for so many years -- ever since Makoto and Haru became

friends in kindergarten -- that the twins think Haru's parents are relatives and treat them accordingly.

"Where'd Mom and Dad go?" Makoto asks the twins, in hopes of distracting them.

"Buying us charms," Ran replies.

"Honestly, you two are so spoiled," Makoto chides, patting Ren's head.

Ran bumps his hand with her head. "Me too."

"No, make Haru do it!" Ren shouts. "You got to hold Makoto's hand on the way here, so it's not fair."

"I have two hands," Makoto points out, placing his other hand on top of Ran's winter hat. "Happy now?"

"Yeah!" the twins chorus.

Makoto's phone goes off -- and so does Haru's. "It's Nagisa," Haru says after checking it. "They're by the bell already."

"I--" Makoto looks around helplessly for his parents. He can't just leave the kids.

"Don't worry, we'll mind them," Haru's mom says with a smile. "You two go on and see your friends."

"No!" Ran says, stomping her foot. "You're always going with your friends, why not greet it with us this year?"

Haru's dad leans over. "Weren't you two going to line up to ring the bell after midnight? And we got here early enough, too."

Ren and Ran exchange looks of utter conflicted bewilderment, and Haru's mom motions for Makoto and Haru to make tracks, which they do. Quickly.

The temple grounds have been filling up steadily since they first got here, but Rei and Nagisa aren't hard to spot -- Nagisa's wearing a pair of Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer antlers and waving frantically at Makoto.

A little further behind Nagisa's antlers, Makoto spies Rin and Ai, standing close together with steaming Styrofoam cups in their hands. Rin looks embarrassed when Makoto catches his eye; Ai looks like the happiest person in the universe.

"Why are you wearing those?" Haru asks when he and Makoto reach the four of them.

"I lost a bet," Nagisa says, as though that explains everything. "Now I have to wear them into the New Year."

"He bet that Rin-san could beat me in the butterfly stroke even though he doesn't practice that as much as freestyle," Rei explains.

"Ai wanted to go to the community centre yesterday," Rin puts in with a haughty look. "So we went, and these guys were there too."

"The Samezuka pool is drained for year-end maintenance during the break," Ai explains, blushing. "And I just said it would be nice to go swimming one more time before the year was out."

Makoto smiles. Haru had the same idea yesterday, but very early in the morning. They were back before their families were up and even got to steal a few kisses in the empty changing room.

"Look, Sei-chan, it's everyone!" Kou's voice pierces the murmurs of the crowds around them.

Rin immediately balks. "Who's Sei-chan?"

Kou and Mikoshiba appear from the other side; her arm looped through his comfortably enough that they're obviously together, if the matching checkered scarves weren't enough of a clue. Makoto is a little surprised -- Mikoshiba's crush on Kou was completely obvious to everyone who ever saw him in her presence, but Kou hid her own feelings well.

"Captain!" Ai exclaims. "You're back for New Year's?"

"As you can see," Mikoshiba says with a smile.

"What's the meaning of *Sei-chan*, huh?" Rin demands, glaring at Kou.

Kou blushes. "Mom said it was okay, so you're not allowed to complain."

"Mom *knows*? But you're only seventeen!"

Kou puts her hands on her hips, and even in her stylish winter coat and adorable earmuffs she somehow manages to look intimidating. "How old is Nitori-kun, again?"

Rin's face turns scarlet, and everyone laughs -- even Rin, eventually.

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When midnight comes, they celebrate together with the rest of the crowd and listen to the tolling bell. Ren and Ran are near the middle of the line, and they both look very solemn and strangely tall as they take their turns -- not at all like little spoiled children who were begging Haru's parents for sweets just an hour earlier. Mikoshiba's brought a professional-looking camera, and he takes photos of all of them, together and in pairs, promising to send them the pictures later.

They run into Yamanoshita from cram school, and she's so visibly pleased to see Makoto that Haru makes a quiet aside about *someone* having a crush. Haru's always right about these sorts of things, so Makoto introduces Haru as his boyfriend. It's scary, to tell a near-stranger such a

private thing, but if Haru's right, it's better for Makoto to be scared than to let another person start the new year off with a false hope. She congratulates them for some reason, wishes them both a happy new year, and disappears into the crowd with her group of friends.

They leave the temple around four in the morning, having exchanged greetings with just about everyone. Their parents go home -- with Ren and Ran already asleep and carried on the backs of the two dads. Makoto and Haru decide to stay up for the first sunrise, as do the rest of their friends. Mikoshiba invites them all to the roof of his family's apartment building, where the sunrise can be seen as clearly as from the mountain.

There are hours still until sunrise, and finally Makoto and Haru can be relatively alone. They take two of the folding chairs supplied by Mikoshiba's dad and carry them near the railings on the edge of the roof, positioning them opposite so they can see each other. The snow stopped falling around two, and the temperature's been rising, so the air is moist and pleasant, not biting like last week.

"My parents have decided to sell the house," Haru says without preamble.

Makoto's glad he was sitting down; he's not sure what to say. The Nanase house is such a permanent and unchangeable fixture in his mind that he can't think of any part of his life so far, or of Iwatobi in general even, without its original inhabitants. He can only imagine how *Haru* must feel. Now he understands why Haru's been a little more detached than usual today.

"My dad's contract came up and they offered him the position full-time," Haru continues, "And with me about to graduate, they said there's no sense in keeping the house. They only let me stay so I didn't have to transfer schools. Mom's going to come back in March so she can get it ready for sale while I graduate and all that."

"Are you okay with that?" Makoto asks. He can plainly see that Haru's not okay with it, but he can't be sure what Haru needs him to do: listen, console, a little bit of both, or neither.

Haru shakes his head. "Grandma would cry if she were here." After a pause, he adds, "well, if she were here, she would be living in the house."

Makoto takes Haru's hands between his. "You can always stay with my family if you need to make a grave visit, no matter what."

"It's not just that," Haru says, making no move to push Makoto's hands away, the way he usually does if Makoto gets too handsy in plain view of others. "If I don't get into university, I'll have to go live with my parents while I study for next year's tests."

Makoto can't fathom being away from Haru for a whole year. He can't.

"Six weeks without you was enough," Haru says, leaning in. "I'm not doing that again."

Makoto leans closer too so their foreheads press together. "But what will you do if you don't pass? Or both of us don't?"

"I dunno," Haru says. "Get a part-time job and rent a room. Something."

Makoto decides now is not the time to point out that renting a room involves ridiculous amounts of money up front. He'd love to say that Haru can just live at his house, but that's not his decision to make, and his parents would want to consult with Haru's parents before allowing it.

So he just nods and closes his eyes. This isn't anything new, really: they still have to study hard and pass the exams, which was their plan from the start. Failure's just become a lot scarier now.

[tbc]

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto goes through the aftermath of exam hell, and the true meaning of Valentine's Day remains a mystery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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"How come you're by yourself?"

Rin's voice startles Makoto; he's been sitting motionless on the floor across from the bathroom on the lower floor of the examination centre. After two days of tests, his brain feels lost without questions that need answering, so Rin's choice of greeting is perfect.

He nods at the bathroom door. "I'm waiting for Haru."

Rin sits down next to him. "So? How do you think it went, overall?"

"I think it went okay," Makoto says. "But it's probably no use wondering. We'll find out soon." He pats his schoolbag. Like everyone else, he's written his answer choices on the question sheets so he can check them when the answers are released later tonight. "What about you?"

Rin shrugs. "Worse than I think, probably. Not that it matters."

Makoto smiles, a little wistful. Rin only took the test because he was already registered for it, even though he has since decided not to attend a Japanese university. He has to wonder if taking the test without the stress of needing to pass can make a difference. Technically, it shouldn't, since if you know something then you know it, and you'll be able to answer a question about it. But during the English listening test, Makoto had to guess more than once. He knows the difference between *except* and *accept*, for example, but it sure was difficult to tell which words were being used on the rapidly spoken question track.

Haru emerges from the bathroom, and the three of them make their way to the train station. All three of them had subject tests on both days, so instead of wagering on winter's mercy, Makoto's parents put them up in a nearby inn. A lot of other area families had the same idea, so the whole experience has sort of felt like being at training camp. A training camp for academic overachievers, Rin called it.

Makoto wishes he could feel relieved for having at least made it through, but he can't. In the weeks since they celebrated the New Year, he's often dreamed that he mixed up the exam dates and showed up a week late, that he slept through his alarm clock, that the train he was taking to the examination centre got stuck halfway to the city because of ice and snow on the tracks.

Yet even after having shown up on time on the correct dates at the right testing centre, even if he gets enough points in all the subjects on the Centre test, there's still the university's own entrance examination, and Makoto even has to go to an interview. Haru's programme just has the entrance exam, thankfully, so at least that's one less thing to worry about. For even if Makoto doesn't get in, as long as Haru does, it will be fine, because Haru will at least live an hour's local train ride away, not three hours by bullet train.

Rin bids them good-bye at his stop, declining Makoto's invitation to come over and check their answers together later.

"I've got my chromebook; I'll take Ai to a movie and then we're going to use the free WiFi at the shopping centre," he explains. "See ya."

Besides, for Rin, the score is just a data point, and he doesn't know what's riding on it for Makoto and Haru. Haru's parents asked him not to talk about the house sale until they're ready to put it on the market; he was only allowed to tell Makoto, since Makoto's parents knew already.

He sends his mom a text to let her know they're on their way home; her reply comes just before the train pulls into Iwatobi station. As he reads it, Makoto's mind floods with the memory of arriving at this same station, though from a different direction, just six months ago. Outside, the buildings and fields are all dressed in their best winter white, but the voice from the train's speakers is still the same pleasant lilt: *Iwatobiii*, like lazy summer days and the gentle splash of waves against the docks.

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We've taken the twins to that interactive play so they'll get
tired out and don't bother you when you look up the exam answers
later. There's meat and potatoes in the fridge, and tell Haru-kun
he can eat the last of the pickled mackerel; I saved it for him.
We'll be home around eight.
```

Makoto follows Haru out onto the platform, tucking the phone back into his bag. The uncertainty he's carried all the way from the testing centre, those memories of summer, his parents' quiet concern -- together these things have filled him with creeping dread. One way or another, it's all about to end.

He didn't expect it to hit him this hard now, of all the times. There are still the Centre Test results, and, if those are favourable, more exams. There's still graduation. There's still either saying good-bye to his family or saying good-bye to Haru, or both. He's always trusted that the future would work itself out somehow, so why can't this uneasy feeling in his chest go away?

"Makoto?"

"Sorry," Makoto says, swallowing past the lump in his throat. "I was just--" he trails off with a helpless shrug because he doesn't know how to explain it in words.

"What did your mom say?" Haru asks.

"They took Ren and Ran to a play. They'll be back in a couple of hours."

Haru tugs on his coat sleeve, beginning to walk in the direction of the stairs. "Come on, it's cold."

Makoto follows him down the steps. Hardly any people are in the station at this time on a Sunday afternoon, so halfway to the street, Haru takes his hand. They're both wearing gloves, but Makoto still feels a lot warmer -- and at the same time sadder. It feels like every reminder of how special Haru is to him is going to put him on the verge of tears until they know *something*. Tonight, if it turns out that Haru's failed to achieve enough points on his Centre Test, they'll have to get ready to say good-bye.

"We don't know anything yet," Haru tells him as they walk past the deserted docks. "So stop working yourself up about it."

And here Makoto thought he was doing a good job of yammering on about every inconsequential thing he could drag to the forefront of his mind. "How do you know I'm doing that?" he asks.

"Because my hand is going numb," Haru explains, raising their linked hands for Makoto's inspection -- and only then does Makoto realise he's been clenching Haru's hand as though clinging to a rope suspended above a bottomless pit.

Makoto loosens his grip hastily. "Sorry. I'm sorry, Haru-chan."

They eat dinner at the Tachibana kitchen table with the TV in the background breathlessly covering the Centre Test via endless interviews with examinees, their parents, teachers, proctors... Makoto ignores them and tries to focus on his food. The seething emptiness in his chest is still there; he was hoping that maybe it was just a weird new form of hunger.

After the dishes are washed, they decide to try some video games as a distraction. Makoto can't even be happy about washing the dishes together with Haru: he's too terrified that in just a couple of hours, the dream of them being able to do this kind of thing every day will lie broken at the bottom of a test-points tally. He *knows* he's being far too dramatic; even if they have to be parted, it'll be temporary; there will be another Centre Test next year, and the year after that they'll both be twenty and can do as they please. But Makoto learned something in the six weeks he spent in Tokyo last summer: even one day away from Haru feels like forever. A year is three hundred and sixty-five forevers too many.

Instead of digging out the game controllers, Haru leans over and kisses Makoto. By now he's got a whole arsenal of kisses for all sorts of occasions, this one is definitely a let's-get-naked kind of kiss.

We shouldn't, Makoto thinks, but this is his room, and the door is closed, and his family won't be home for another hour and a half, and when Haru touches him, all the empty spaces fill right up.

He hasn't even thought about sex at all since yesterday morning, which was just as well with Rin sleeping in the futon on the other side of him in the hotel, but now that Haru's tugging his sweater off him, Makoto can't think of anything else.

Haru's next kiss is an I-want-to-pound-you-into-this-floor sort of kiss, which is surprising; Haru usually only gets in that kind of mood after he's been swimming, especially if he gets to swim alone.

"You want to top?" Makoto asks when they pull apart, just to make sure.

Haru does, but with all the studying and cram school and regular school, they haven't been together like this in weeks, and they're both done before Makoto even realises that there isn't any lube. It's at Haru's house, hidden under some old clothes in a storage bin under Haru's bed, where they put it after their Christmas trip.

"Next time," Haru tells him, and though Makoto's well and truly spent, still there's a pleasant anticipatory quiver in the pit of his belly. They clean themselves up and get dressed, then lie on Makoto's bed, talking lazily about playing some video games but instead burrowing closer and closer together until Makoto dozes off to the sound of Haru's heartbeat beneath his fingertips.

*

"Well?" Dad asks, turning around from his seat at the computer desk. Haru and Makoto have just spent the previous half hour marking up their question sheets based on the answers he read out to them from the Centre Test authority's site.

"It'll take a bit longer than a minute to add them all up, Dad," Makoto says, a little peevishly.

He ended up marking a lot of Xs on the English sheets and won't know if he passed that portion until he can tally up the correct answers. But he's pretty sure he did well in all his other subjects, and a proper count bears this out.

"Barely," Makoto breathes after tallying English slowly and carefully. "Just barely passed."

"Four points," Haru says with a dumbfounded look at his own English sheets. "I'm four points over."

"What about the rest?" Dad asks. "You had four subjects each, right?"

Haru nods. "I have enough to apply."

"More than enough," Makoto confirms. They're not results that'll turn any heads on the admissions committee or make anyone suspect him of being a genius, but they're good enough.

He feels like he can smile again. He wants to throw himself at Haru and cry with relief, but he doesn't think his dad really understands just how physical their relationship is. Haru stayed awake while Makoto slept upstairs and he made sure to move from the bed to the floor when he heard them arriving. It's one thing to let your parents know you're dating; it's quite another to show them.

"Looks like Rin-kun taught you two very well," Dad says with a smile. "Make sure you treat him to something nice."

"*Yakiniku*," Makoto and Haruka say together, and then Makoto bursts out laughing.

"That's the first time you did that since the year started," Haru remarks with a small smile.

Makoto blinks. "I-- really?" He turns to his dad with a questioning look.

Dad nods. "We were all getting a little worried. Ren was half-convinced that aliens kidnapped the real you."

Makoto rubs his face with both hands and exhales a deeply-drawn breath. "Maybe they did. Maybe that was alien Makoto who wrote the test. Now that Haru-chan and I both passed, he's gone back to his home planet."

"Planet Uranus!" Ren shrieks, behind them, and the three of them turn around to find the twins standing in the doorway in their pyjamas, their hands linked.

"Does this mean Makoto's not going away?" Ran asks, her eyes hopeful.

"I-- um." Makoto gives his father a helpless look.

"Where's Mom?" Dad asks. "Honey, the kids passed the Centre Test!"

There's a metallic crash from the kitchen and then the sound of running feet.

*

As the winter stretches on, Haru and Makoto attend regular classes less and less often. Haru's entrance examination is going to have an essay portion, so he's writing a lot of essays in advance using past exam questions from a book they found at a second-hand online bookshop Rei recommended.

Makoto's preparing for interview questions. He's sought out some others currently in the veterinary science programme for tips, and sometimes just reading their responses to his emails, it feels like he's already in university.

They've practically moved into Haru's house for the time being; Makoto does go home every once in a while to play with his siblings and get some clothes. So many of his things are at Haru's place that it feels a lot like they're living together, except Makoto's pretty sure people who actually live together don't get as excited as he does when he sees Haru absent-mindedly put on one of his shirts.

Rei and Nagisa pay them a visit one day in February, Nagisa demanding to know which one of them is the woman before he's even seated properly in the living room.

"Neither, obviously," Haru says, setting down a tea tray. "We're both men."

"See?" Rei says. "I told you."

Nagisa blows on his tea. "But how do you decide who gives whom chocolate tomorrow?"

Haru and Makoto look at each other, then back at Nagisa. "Tomorrow?" Makoto asks.

"Chocolate?" Haru echoes.

Nagisa's look of exasperation turns to one of slight pity. "I know you guys have been too busy to leave the house much, but I didn't know you've lost all touch with reality. I'm talking about Valentine's day, obviously. Valentine's Day!"

"Ah," Makoto says. He's forgotten all about it. "Well, it's not something we can celebrate, is it? Neither of us is a girl."

"But it's a day for loverrrrrs," Nagisa moans ghoulishly.

"Actually," Rei says, pushing his glasses up with a look of triumph, "It's most likely a co-opted form of an ancient festival called the Lupercalia, in honour of a female wolf who breastfed the founders of Rome."

"You're both wrong," Haru says. "it's about St. Valentine who went around giving presents to people because he wanted them to be happy. For some reason it became about chocolate in Japan."

Rei frowns. "No, that's St. Nicholas -- or Santa Claus. That's Christmas."

"Isn't Christmas a day for lovers too, though?" Makoto objects. "I like Christmas better. Instead of one person giving the other chocolate, you both share a cake."

"We didn't have any cake at Christmas," Haru points out.

"Yeah, but--" Makoto's about to mention a particularly intimate detail of their Christmas date before he remembers they aren't alone. *How easy it was to get used to being together all the time.* "--we ate oden."

Nagisa bursts out laughing, and the reason Makoto's blushing goes undetected.

Eventually Rei and Nagisa settle on exchanging chocolates on Valentine's Day *and* White Day. Makoto has a sneaking suspicion that Nagisa just really wanted to eat chocolate-covered strawberries from that new sweet shop that opened in town at the start of the year. He mostly suspects this because Nagisa proceeds to mention said strawberries at least five times.

A week remains until the entrance examinations.

*

"How was it?" Haru asks when they meet near the rock formation in the middle of the pine-studded university common.

A long, long time ago -- before the Centre Test, before they knew the Nanase house was getting sold -- they came here on a date. Now they're here on official business, so to speak, except it has already concluded.

Makoto breathes in deeply. It's still February, but the air is damp and woodsy, not crisp. Winter's hold on the region is loosening. "I think it went okay."

"The interview, too?"

Makoto nods. He did his best: he didn't stammer, he stayed on topic about the science but didn't forget to consider ethics. If the decisions were based on interviews alone, he would have been confident that he passed. After years of being with Haru, he's become very good at reading people, and he could tell the interviewers liked him. Maybe even a lot.

Haru steps up next to him so that his shoulder touches Makoto's upper arm. "Mine went okay too. Next time we come here, we'll know."

"Yeah." Makoto puts his arm around Haru's shoulders and imagines the wooden stands all around this area with examinee numbers on them. "One month to go."

[to be concluded]

Chapter End Notes

> Next chapter will be the final one, though I may not be able to get it done next week for dental surgery reasons, and the weekend after I will be travelling for work. So there may not be an update until the end of the month. I will try to get it done next week though; I'm pretty sure I'll be on regular painkillers and not the knockouty kind, but there's no way to tell in advance how things will go. :3

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

In which the story ends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"When's your mom's train supposed to get in tomorrow?" Makoto asks.

Haru glances at him. "Two in the afternoon."

"After, then."

Haru nods.

After. After they know what's going to happen to them. After they cross the street to the campus, to the common with its majestic pines and a new green grass-carpet, to the endless rows of student numbers.

Makoto sighs and zips up the duffel bag. In it are all of his possessions that have gravitated to Haru's house over the many years they've been friends. He decided to get them out of the way now so Haru and his mom have one less thing to worry about. Soon, everything else in this living room and in the rest of the house is going to be in boxes and suitcases, waiting for movers to come and take them on a long-haul trip.

"I don't want to see you leaving with that," Haru says with a pointed stare at the duffel bag. Makoto realises it's the same one he took to Tokyo.

He nods. "I'll go and leave it outside the door."

Haru scoots across the floor to sit closer to him. "No, put it in the entrance. You'll forget it otherwise, and the cats will get into it."

Makoto puts his arms around Haru; it's a bit awkward at this angle, so Haru manoeuvres between Makoto's legs and sits with his back to Makoto's chest. Makoto holds him tighter. "I wonder if the people who buy your house will feed the cats, too."

"Don't say sad things," Haru scolds him. "I'll tell my mom she has to put that in the sale agreement."

His t-shirt has slid out of place on his shoulders, and Makoto presses a kiss to the exposed skin. "When we get our own place, let's get a cat."

"Okay."

Makoto kisses the side of Haru's neck. "Maybe two cats. One would be lonely while we're not home."

"Or a puppy, so the cat has someone to order around. Cats like being the boss."

"Puppies need lots of human attention," Makoto points out. "We might be too busy for that."

Haru tips his head back onto Makoto's shoulder. "We could get a pet sitter."

"The puppy might get so attached to the pet sitter that it wouldn't like us any more."

"Okay, no puppy. Unless one of us becomes a house husband."

Makoto flushes. "Is that what we're going to be? Husbands?"

Haru gives him a pointed look. "That's how it works when you get married, Makoto."

Makoto smiles a little sadly. "We can't really get married."

"We could if we went to Disneyland," Haru says, and Makoto remembers that story Nagisa showed them about the two women in pretty wedding dresses who got married at Disneyland a couple of years ago. Though he still suspects Nagisa was mostly trying to gauge Makoto's and Haru's interest in wearing wedding dresses, because he probably made one of his insane bets with Rei.

"We could," Makoto says. "That's in Tokyo, though, didn't you hate it?"

"I don't mind going to Tokyo if it's to marry you."

"Stop saying that so casually," Makoto complains. "We haven't even talked to our parents." He's not being very honest; he'd like to sit here and listen to Haru talk about getting married for a hundred years, but it's also making him sad, because even with all this, they still might be separated.

Haru pulls his head down and steals a kiss. "I'll propose properly later and we can talk to our parents."

"Haru-chan, I don't think I'll be able to let you go," Makoto says quietly. "If you have to go live with your parents, I'll just follow you, even if I get into university. I can apply to defer my admission or something."

"Don't be ridiculous. If you get in, you have to stay here. I told you, I'll get a job teaching little kids to swim or something, like Coach did. I'm not leaving you."

This time Haru's kiss is deeper, more insistent. Makoto loses his train of thought and lets Haru push him down to the floor and get on top of him. They've done this a lot since the entrance exams, as though trying to disappear into each other so they don't have to think about the uncertain future ahead of them. Part of him thinks it's better if they try to keep their

hands off each other for a while, so they can get used to being apart, but who's he kidding? He couldn't keep his hands off Haru any more than he can keep his eyes off him.

Soon, their clothes are in two piles under the table and Haru's straddling Makoto again, but this time he's sliding down onto Makoto's cock, and Makoto gasps, pushing into him, blood running hot and cold as Haru gets comfortable and starts moving, his hands finding Haru's and twining their fingers together. He looks up into Haru's eyes, but it isn't enough; Haru's too far away like this. Makoto stops moving and makes him bend down, kisses his slackened mouth greedily and holds him close until they find a new rhythm, their sweating bodies sliding against each other until Haru's deep, whole-body shudder overwhelms Makoto's senses.

They wear each other out that night -- Makoto topping in the living room, and later, blowjobs in the shower, and then much later, Haru topping on the floor by his bed. That is where they fall asleep, in their over-indulgent three-futon assortment, wrapped up tightly together. They don't talk about this maybe being the last time for a while; there is no need to talk about that.

*

"Our examinee numbers were close together," Makoto says. "So they'll probably be near each other on the boards, too."

Haru bumps Makoto's shoulder with his own as they're walking. "Relax." *We'll know when we get there.*

Makoto knows Haru's right; he knows there's no use trying to keep a conversation going when everyone in the crowd headed towards campus is obviously tense and worried. Some people joke nervously in taut voices, but they're quickly stared down.

The atmosphere's different by the announcement boards -- lots of laughter and music and loud cheers. Some of the university's clubs are on hand with flyers and brochures, though they seem to be handing those to everyone, not bothering to find out if they've passed or not.

"Look, Makoto."

Haru's pointing at a makeshift signpost that says *Out-of-town Students*.

They follow the arrow and arrive at a cluster of boards each of which has a town name at the top.

"Where are you two from?" asks a bespectacled woman who might be a professor or a caretaker for all Makoto knows.

"I-Iwatobi," Makoto says. "That's, um, to the east."

"Oh yeah, I've been there. Squid, right? Your board's on the other side, just walk around here and you'll see it right off."

"How come they separated the other towns?" Haru asks.

"Crowd control," the woman replies. "Few years ago, a couple of kids nearly got trampled."

"That's terrible," Makoto says, but she's already moved on to the next confused out-of-towner.

Makoto looks at the boards, then back at Haru. "Looks like this'll go faster than we thought, huh?"

Haru grabs his hand. "Come on."

Makoto doesn't even have to scan the board; his examinee number is right at the top, and Haru's is right underneath it.

His chest grows tight around his pounding heart. All over the common, people are hugging their neighbours and jumping up on each other's shoulders and cheering, so Makoto wraps Haru into his arms and hides his face in Haru's hair. "I'm so glad," he says, his voice breaking.

"Me too," Haru mumbles. "You're gonna crush me."

"Sorry," Makoto says, loosening his hold. Haru takes two fistfuls of his light spring jacket and holds on tightly, breathing slowly and heavily.

We made it.

"Squid, right?" Makoto whispers, and Haru's shoulders shake.

*

"I'm so relieved he got in, honestly, it would have been so hard on him to have to start all over in a completely unfamiliar place," Haru's mom tells Makoto's mom. "Haru-kun's never been a very sociable child--"

"Mom," Haru complains. "Stop talking about me like I'm six years old."

"Sorry, sorry," she says with a mischievous grin. "My son is not a very sociable adult, you see."

"Mom!" Haru exclaims, scandalised, and everyone laughs.

"So have you two decided where you're going to live?" Makoto's dad asks.

"The dorms?" Makoto ventures. They got so excited yesterday that they went home without getting any more information, figuring it'd be in their welcome packages that should be arriving before the week is out.

"At that school?" Haru's mom says. "No, you don't want to stay in the dorms there, Mako-kun. It's not written down anywhere, but the dorms are de facto for the use of agricultural school students. It's their job to take care of the animals -- they're basically free labour for the

university, you see, in exchange for room and board -- so the admins let them have first pick. The dorms are noisy from very early in the morning because that's a farmer's life after all."

"I never heard anything about that," Haru says. "How do you know?"

"Your father went there. Isn't that why you chose it?"

Haru makes a noncommittal noise that to Makoto says that he either had no idea or totally forgot. "But how do *you* know that? You didn't go there."

"Because I came to visit your dad when we were still dating, obviously. He lived in one of the off-campus towers, and it was very nice. Not very private -- extremely thin walls -- but nice."

"You know, Haru-kun could just come live with us," Makoto's mom suggests. "It's only a short train ride after all."

"I couldn't," Haru says. "It seems Ran's looking forward to taking over Makoto's room."

"I agree," Makoto says before his mom can insist that it's no trouble, really.

He loves his family, but Haru's the one he wants to be with.

*

Makoto manages to keep it together all through the formal graduation ceremony: the brass band's solemnity, the final walk to the podium side by side with Haru, the national anthem and the school song, the principal's speech, the PTA chairman's address, the mayor's message for the new graduates, the student council president's halting but inspirational goodbye, even *Hotaru no Hikari*.

The dam breaks when they leave the classroom for the last time after the final homeroom gathering and walk right into the younger club representatives waiting outside, the swim club right at the front.

Nagisa and Kou are holding a giant *All the Best, Haru-chan & Mako-chan!* banner decorated with penguins and hearts, and it finally hits Makoto that he'll never see them like this again. Sure, they'll keep in touch, but he and Haru are about to walk out into the world -- a place so vast, so broad, that a little school like theirs is easily left behind. It's not just these walls and desks they are leaving behind, either: it's all their younger friends and fellow club members. All the memories.

Makoto claps a hand over his mouth as the tears begin flowing from his eyes of their own accord. He's been so absorbed in what would happen to him and Haru that he didn't even think about graduation and what it would mean. This isn't like elementary or junior high graduation: Iwatobi's a small town. Everyone still ended up in the same school, and if not, they saw each other in town. This is forever. They're not just leaving Iwatobi High: they're leaving Iwatobi.

He used to think "bittersweet" just meant something like biting into an unpeeled tangerine, but now he understands the deeper meaning to it.

"Where's Rei?" Haru asks as the swim club members surround them, chattering. He's got one hand on Makoto's back, and perhaps it's Makoto's imagination, but his voice is a little tighter than usual.

"Rei-chan started crying too early so he went to the bathroom to clean up," Nagisa says.

"I wasn't crying," Rei protests, materialising suddenly. "I just have really bad allergies."

"Unfair, Rei-chan, you infected me with your allergies," Nagisa says and surreptitiously wipes a tear from the corner of his eye. Makoto can't help but laugh, and that helps with the crying, but not by a lot.

They go down to the pool -- which is still drained and in dire need of cleaning -- where the team showers the two of them with parting gifts: bookmark sets, stationery, Iwatobi-chan paraphernalia, and chocolate, mostly, though Rei outdoes everyone as usual with a pair of identical fountain pens with Makoto's and Haru's English initials engraved on the nibs.

And then the school's PA system calls all students to gather at the main entrance -- it's time to leave. Iwatobi High has a tradition of graduates leaving the grounds as a group while the rest of the school sings the school song to send them on their way.

"Come watch us practice in the summer!" Nagisa yells at the last. "Good luck, Haru-chan! Mako-chan! We'll come visit you in your new place!"

*

On their way home, they stop at the edge of the dock. If Makoto stares straight ahead, it's almost like they're floating above the water on a platform, the sea wind at their backs propelling them forward, the seagulls crying out their plaintive greetings. Or maybe good-byes.

"I love you," Haru says, squeezing his hand.

It's not the first time he's said it, but it's the first time he isn't whispering or immediately running away or hiding his face or saying it in the dark. It feels as though they've sailed a boat by dead reckoning all this time -- having a pretty good idea where they were going but not really knowing it. Now it feels as though all the stars have come out at once, shining all the way into the future.

Haru's looking up at him, his eyes clearer than the sky, and he's so beautiful that Makoto's breath becomes trapped in his chest. "H-Haru-chan, I--"

"I know," Haru says. "Let's go home, Makoto."

[end]

Chapter End Notes

;_; it's over! Thank you so much to everyone who read along and left feedback/kudos/asks, and sorry for the delay in getting the last chapter posted. I hope you have enjoyed it. ♥♥♥ I am going to revisit them at university in a crossover with Kuroko no Basket (KagaKuro) at some point in the future -- it won't be a long work-in-progress, just a novella length probably, pure domestic curtain-fic really (I have no shame). I'm hoping to get it finished sometime before the new season of Free! airs. ^_^

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